天地無用！魎皇鬼

天地様、ご乱心!?(下)

長谷川菜穂子

イラスト　大和田直之

富士見ファンタジア文庫

Tenchi Muyo! Ryo-Ohki

Tenchi-sama's gone mad!? (Part 2)

By Naoko Hasegawa

Novel 5

Machine Translated and Edited by
Eff_Efferson
(April 2026)

For more: visit tenchimuyotranslationblog.blogspot.com

Chapter Nine:
"Tenchi..."

"Tenchi..."

Someone was calling from far away.

"Tenchi... wake up."

Ryoko?

Ah, is it morning already...?

Tenchi tried to pull up the blanket and grabbed something soft.

"Just a little longer..."

Thinking it felt a bit thin for a blanket, he pulled it up all at once.

"Nnh...♡"

Along with a cooing voice, slender fingers pulled back against the smooth blanket.

Blanket? No, it wasn't a blanket. Silk sheets?

With an ominous premonition, Tenchi tried to leap out of bed, only to see his own hand hitching up Ryoko’s skirt.

He let go of the fabric as if he’d been burned.

"Are you finally awake?"

Ryoko’s golden eyes were right in front of him, barely ten centimeters away.

"Ryoko!?"

Her face broke into a wide grin.

"What are you so surprised for? It’s me! Me!"

Tenchi stared blankly at Ryoko’s blissfully happy face for a moment, then suddenly bolted upright as if having a fit.

"Where are we? Where’s Ayeka? What happened to Ryo-Ohki!?"

He looked around frantically.

However, all that met his eyes was a space filled with mist.

"We finally get to be alone together, and all you can think about is Ayeka?"

Ryoko swayed the hem of her white wedding dress and took Tenchi’s arm.

"Who cares about that? You and I are starting a new life together."

"A-A new life!?"

For a split second, the words ***NEW LIFE*** printed in bold gothic type roared through Tenchi’s mind like a heavy tank.

"You... what... me..."

It seemed part of his brain cells had been reset; the words wouldn't come out.

"That's right, Seiran! Wasn't I at a wedding with him? In that dress, I was the attendant, there was an altar, and Ayeka, Kiyone, and Mihoshi were watching... the ring..."

His memory came rushing back all at once.

Not a ring—the Ring.

Seiran had taken the Ring from his wrist and put it on Ryoko’s arm.

The priest said something, and then...

A flashback of Ryo-Ohki’s bridge, as seen in that final moment, flickered through Tenchi’s mind.

Seiran’s stunned face, the priest’s eyes like topaz set in crystal, and that moment when his vision suddenly went pure white.

"Ryoko! You did it again!"

Tenchi tried desperately to shake off Ryoko, who was clinging to his arm.

"You kidnapped me!"

"What was that?"

Ryoko asked back with a face that suggested she didn't care one bit what "kidnapping" meant.

"You didn't think I'd leave you behind, did you?"

She remained stuck fast to Tenchi's side, seemingly with no intention of letting go.

"Then what? Did you plan this from the start?"

"Plan what?"

"From the very beginning, you tricked us..."

"What are you talking about, Tenchi?"

Ryoko's eyes grew sharp.

"Have I ever tricked you, even once? I've been saying it forever—I'm yours, and you're mine. That was the only chance I had to save you. It's his fault for thinking he could catch me with a single ring!"

Ryoko's eyes were strangely serious, and Tenchi felt his resolve waver.

"So... it was to save me..."

"That's what I've been saying."

"But you said 'I do' to him..."

"The ceremony wouldn't have moved forward if I didn't, right?"

"But, you said goodbye..."

"I wasn't the one who said that!"

Ryoko's pupils were like golden flames.

Tenchi stared at Ryoko, opened his lips, but ultimately swallowed his breath without saying a word.

"Tenchi... let's go somewhere. Just the two of us, somewhere no one can bother us... We can call Ryo-Ohki later. We can be pirates again like the old days, or live on some tiny little planet. I'll protect you. You don't have to do anything, you don't even need the power of Jurai. Swinging a sword and fighting... that's not really your style, is it? If there's anything you want, I'll get it for you. I just need you by my side."

Suddenly, arms wrapped around him, and before he knew it, Tenchi was pulled into Ryoko's embrace.

The scent of the shampoo Ryoko always used wafted from her aqua hair.

Along with that faint fragrance, a vision of a normal morning at the Masaki household—now seemingly so far away—passed through his mind.

Ryoko sprawled out on a ceiling beam like a cat.

Ayeka, perfectly composed, watering the plants with elegant movements.

Mihoshi, curled up on the sofa clutching a cushion.

The wonderful smell of miso soup drifting from the kitchen, and the owner of those pitter-patter footsteps poking her head out.

"Tenchi-niichan, breakfast is almost ready! Help me carry the bowls."

Ryo-Ohki, perched on Sasami’s head, pricking up her ears in surprise.

His father, looking strangely natural in an apron; Grandpa and Kiyone appearing just as the meal was set as if they’d timed it; Washu already sitting in the best seat... and then a petty squabble starting over something small...

"Ryoko."

Tenchi hesitantly put his hands around Ryoko’s waist and, making up his mind, hugged her back.

In this mist-like, empty space, only the pure white wedding dress felt strangely real.

Should he just run away with Ryoko?

Even though they hadn't even reached Jurai yet?

Abandoning his father and grandfather?

No! It’s too soon!

To decide his life right here and now...

"I'm sorry. I..."

He tried to say *I can't go*, but the words caught on the tip of his tongue.

Inside Tenchi’s arms, Ryoko’s body stiffened.

Her hands pulled away.

By the time he realized it, Ryoko had already slipped away, dodging out of his embrace.

"Wait!"

He scrambled to take her hand.

Ryoko’s form vanished for an instant, reappearing just out of reach.

"Just kidding, Tenchi."

Ryoko’s form vanished again.

Before he could think, the discarded dress dissolved into the mist, and Ryoko appeared in her battle suit.

"I just thought that might be nice, you know...?"

Again she vanished, appearing even further away.

She pressed her wrists together as if offering a prayer and opened her arms.

The gems on her wrists glowed like small flames through the white mist.

"Don't worry. I'll send you back properly."

For a moment, he thought he saw Ryoko’s expression twist with loneliness.

"Wait! Let’s go back together. Ryoko!?"

Suddenly, Tenchi felt as if the space around him was shrinking.

He was being pulled further and further away from Ryoko.

Or perhaps Ryoko was the one moving away.

"RYOKO—!"

Tenchi screamed with all his might toward the figure that now looked like nothing more than a mass of thick fog, but his voice didn't seem to reach her.

Space closed around Tenchi.

He could no longer hear or see anything.

Cuddled into a ball like a small creature with his knees hugged to his chest, Tenchi was pushed out into the sea of stars, protected by an energy field.

Ryoko, in her battle suit, appeared as if looking down at the energy sphere drifting slowly by inertia alone.

"Ryo-Ohki!"

She called out via the Astral Link.

"Meewww..."

There was a faint response.

"Pick up Tenchi and go back to Earth. Don't come chasing after me."

Without waiting for an answer, Ryoko cut the Astral Link and, as if suddenly noticing, looked out across the dark universe.

The unblinking stars all directed their frozen gazes toward her at once.

Ryoko stared back into the eyes of her old friends and let her lips relax into a faint smile.

After Ryoko vanished from that space.

Suddenly, a flash of light split the darkness.

The light scattered in all directions, eventually forming the shape of a rose wet with morning dew.

The outermost petals unraveled and slowly began to bloom.

When the energy field surrounding Tenchi touched the edge of a petal, the rose glowed as if trembling with joy.

A moment later, the petal swallowed the energy field and closed.

The rose of light slowly faded, and the darkness returned.

A few seconds later, the only things shining there were the unblinking, distant stars.

Meanwhile, in the meeting room of the missionary caravan, Ayeka and Seiran were glaring at each other across a single holo-display, while Kiyone watched the situation anxiously.

Three hours had already passed since they were thrown out by Ryo-Ohki and rescued by this caravan.

The vice-priest had left immediately, and the nun who had initially brought them drinks and blankets also left once Ayeka regained consciousness.

Several believers had been busily coming in and out of the meeting room to set up recovered tapestries and candlesticks, but once finished, they seemed to return to their respective jobs. Those remaining were only the elderly and children with no particular business, and even they stayed huddled in the corners, casting frequent glances at Ayeka and the others.

They looked as if they were wondering what this group—a man who was clearly a pirate (Seiran), a sharp-eyed plainclothes detective (Kiyone), strange log-like attendants (the Guardians), and a haughty woman screaming at a dazed woman (Ayeka and Mihoshi)—was up to now.

From the holo-display on the table rose a small, blonde beauty with a captivating smile, emitting an aura like a fashion model or a star singer.

The black jumpsuit clinging to her skin was of a common design, and she wore no particular ornaments.

Neither Kiyone nor Mihoshi recognized the woman’s face, but she might have been in disguise.

Unless they took biometric data, confirmation would be difficult... or perhaps she wasn't a pirate.

Either way, they had to return to the shuttle to check, but...

Kiyone shuddered, imagining Mihoshi requesting backup from Superintendent Anderson.

"Chief, it's terrible! Sasami-chan was kidnapped, but we don't know who did it. The shuttle was taken over by Washu-chan, Ryo-Ohki went somewhere, and on top of that, Tenchi-san has gone missing... Oh, what should we do..."

Kiyone looked at the seemingly mindless Mihoshi and frowned, letting out a sigh.

If a report like that was made, Mihoshi aside, I’d definitely be fired.

Mihoshi was staring blankly at Seiran’s face with her chin in her hands.

How can this girl be so relaxed? I wonder what she’s thinking.

Just as Kiyone’s irritation was about to reach its peak, Ayeka, with a grim expression, spoke up.

"Who on earth is this woman?"

"Ayeka-san, it's fine, just leave this to us..."

Kiyone stepped in, mindful of the believers watching from a distance.

"You be quiet!"

Ayeka snapped at her, straightened her back, and turned back to Seiran.

"If you know, won't you tell us?"

"No thanks."

A truly concise answer came back.

"Take these off first. Then I'll tell you anything. That’s a fair trade, isn't it?"

"This criminal... wants to trade with me!?"

Ayeka, losing her temper, instinctively shouted.

"You’re going to prison anyway! I’ll have you executed by the power of the Juraian Royal Family!"

"I was just trying to marry Ryoko."

Seiran replied with a face just as grim as Ayeka’s.

"And that was in the presence of the First Princess of the Juraian Royal Family and the Galaxy Police. I’d like you to tell me what’s so inconvenient about that."

Ayeka choked on her words.

It was true that she had permitted it.

"But you threatened us!"

Ayeka shouted, remembering the Ring.

"You said it clearly—that the Ring was rigged. You targeted members of the Royal Family, so it's a grave crime. It’s the death penalty after all!"

"Do you have evidence?"

Seiran’s lips twisted into a mock sneer.

"You’re the one who believed a bluff, aren't you? You're the one threatening me right now."

"Threatening? If I had a rope and a gallows here, I’d have hanged you long ago!"

Kiyone held her head in her hands.

Now that the Ring had vanished along with Ryo-Ohki, there was no point in this arguing.

Whether they were going after Sasami or deciding Seiran’s punishment, they couldn't do anything until they returned to the shuttle.

"Listen, Ayeka-san."

Kiyone called out to the hot-blooded princess, trying to resolve the immediate problem.

"If you won't talk, then fine!"

Ayeka slammed the table in the meeting room and stood up.

"How frightened Sasami must be! She must be tied up, rolled into a corner of a cargo hold. Or maybe her voice is hoarse from crying too much... Even if she’s a woman, she’s a pirate; there's no telling what rough things she’s doing. Oh, Sasami!"

Ayeka trembled as she glared at the ceiling of the meeting room, then suddenly turned toward the Guardians standing behind Seiran.

"Azaka! Kamidake! I am going to have a direct talk with the Priest. Follow me!"

"As you wish!"

the Guardians replied in perfect harmony.

"What shall we do with this pirate?"

"He's an insect!"

Ayeka turned around.

"Let the representative of the law teach him some manners! Kiyone-san, make sure you get all the information about that woman."

Ayeka held her head high and prepared to leave the room with the Guardians in tow.

"W-Wait a minute!"

A stunned Kiyone hurriedly stopped Ayeka.

"A direct talk? What do you plan to do?"

"Rendezvous with Washu-san’s shuttle, of course. Since it's an emergency, I'll have this caravan send us. Mihoshi-san, don't just sit there—contact her again. We need to coordinate the rendezvous point!"

Ayeka brushed off Kiyone’s hand and walked out quickly with her Guardians.

"Wait, I said!"

Kiyone panicked.

"I’m coming too. Mihoshi, I’m leaving Seiran to you."

The meeting room, which had gone silent for a moment, buzzed back to life.

Mihoshi instinctively looked at Seiran and shrugged.

"Kiyone-chan is always like that. She decides everything on her own and runs off. Ayeka-san beat her to the punch today, though."

Seiran looked back at Mihoshi with a deflated expression.

"You... you’re a detective, aren't you?"

"Yes."

Mihoshi answered while idly scratching at a food stain on the table with her fingernail.

"Mihoshi Kuramitsu, First-Class Detective of the Solar System Branch."

"Kuramitsu?"

Seiran furrowed his brow.

"By any chance, do you have some connection to Director Kuramitsu?"

"He’s my grandfather."

Mihoshi answered sounding bored, then suddenly jumped.

"Oh dear, my fingernail has turned all black. Do you have a handkerchief or a tissue?"

"You're a woman and you don't even have a handkerchief?"

Seiran was exasperated, then was stunned to realize he was making small talk with a detective.

"Well... we left everything on the shuttle."

Mihoshi's eyes began to well up.

"Don't be mean—won't you lend me one?"

Seiran instinctively reached for his trouser pocket, then shook his head and thrust out his handcuffed wrists.

"I'll lend it to you if you take these off."

"Wait."

Mihoshi wiped her eyes with her sleeve and pressed somewhere on her bracelet.

With a light *ping*, the handcuffs unlocked and fell onto the table.

Seiran stared at his wrists, then at the fallen handcuffs, and gently twisted his paralyzed left wrist.

"It's fixed..."

"That's good."

Mihoshi smiled as she stuffed the handcuffs into her pocket.

"The magnetism must have worked."

"Magnetism?"

Seiran opened and closed his fingers, still bewildered.

"Those are made of a special metal. They were originally a health product—apparently they help with biorhythms and calming the mind. I had them modified thinking they might work on criminals, too."

"....."

Is this girl an idiot?

Seiran was dazed for a while, then remembered the handkerchief and hurried to search his pockets.

There were only receipts from a convenience station.

Seiran turned his pockets inside out, sighed, and took off his bandana.

"Here."

He ran a hand through his now-loose, sand-colored hair.

"Oh, thank you."

Mihoshi took the bandana and was about to clean her nail when she suddenly stopped.

"Actually, I feel bad, so I'll go wash my hands."

Seeing Mihoshi stand up, Seiran instinctively spoke out.

"Is it okay?"

"Eh?"

"I'm a pirate. You don't know what I'll do. Why did you take the handcuffs off so easily?"

"Oh, that?"

Mihoshi sat back down and began carefully folding the bandana.

"Because you don't look like a bad person. If you were a real villain, something would have happened to us by now. Right?"

Asked so innocently, Seiran was at a loss for words.

"Then... why did you put the handcuffs on in the first place?"

"I thought you might commit suicide from the shock."

Mihoshi turned to Seiran, whispering with a serious expression in her sky-blue eyes.

"I'm sure Ryoko-san will come back. Tenchi-san has a much bigger mission, so I think Ryoko-san is the one who will have a hard time. Maybe... I think Ryoko-san knows that, too..."

Mihoshi gave a bright smile.

"My grandfather said it: first, you must believe. The Goddess smiles upon those who love life and do not lose hope. You look like someone who could do all three, don't you?"

Seiran suddenly felt a warmth in his chest.

She’s a good girl... I never thought a girl like this would be among those carrion-feeding detectives...

He could escape now.

He could use his weapons.

This girl wouldn't even doubt him until a light-sword pierced her heart.

"Go wash your hands. You can have the bandana."

Seiran looked away and slowly began flexing the fingers of his left hand.

"Is that okay? But this is all you have, right?"

Mihoshi stood up again but didn't try to take the bandana.

"It's thanks for taking off the handcuffs."

A hand, large for a woman’s, reached out and gently picked up the bandana.

"Oh, thank you."

Light footsteps receded, and the creak of the meeting room door was heard.

Seiran ran his hand through his hair with his now-functioning left hand.

Since he had removed the bandana, his sand-colored hair flowed down as soon as he pushed it back.

"I'll just braid it or something," Seiran muttered, surprised to find he had forgotten—if only for a moment—his irritation toward the vanished Ryoko.

Was I... under some kind of spell?

Seiran relaxed his cheeks and mocked himself.

Certainly, Director Kuramitsu’s granddaughter was no ordinary person.

Seiran ruminated on the moment Ryoko vanished with a pang in his chest.

"Sorry, Seiran!"

The face Ryoko had when she shouted that was just like the Ryoko of old, certainly overflowing with energy.

There was hope.

As long as he didn't throw it away himself.

Seiran left the reins of the monster raging inside him to a foolish rider and closed his eyes.

Ryoko will surely return.

The rider with sky-blue eyes gripped the reins firmly with his large hands and nodded with a smile.

Seiran felt drowsy and stretched out his stiff limbs.

He lay down on the long bench.

Before he knew it, Seiran had fallen asleep. His slumber remained undisturbed until Ayeka and Kiyone returned from their direct talk in a state of shock.

Beside him, the returned Mihoshi was sleeping soundly, slumped over the table.

Now, around that time, Sasami was sitting on a plush sofa on a luxurious bridge, eating top-grade chocolates with a blonde woman.

"Big sister. If you eat too much, you'll get cavities."

"It's fine, little lady. Want some more milk? If you'd prefer alcohol, I've got brandy."

The woman, who had changed into an ultra-mini blue dress, carelessly kicked off her silver high heels which were buried in the shaggy mat.

"Wasn't that fun? You know, since I became a pirate, I'd never done a kidnapping. I wanted to try it just once. The only thing I haven't done yet is murder, but that’s a bit much. It goes against my aesthetic. Come here, Mag."

A fluffy ball with ears and a tail jumped onto the woman’s lap.

The creature, which looked more like a giant mouse than a cat, purred contentedly.

"Where do you want to go? Shall we go get something delicious to eat?"

"Big sister..."

Sasami was troubled.

"I was kidnapped, right? Or, if we go to eat, will you let me go home?"

That really was a kidnapping, wasn't it...

Sasami remembered the suspense that had passed in the blink of an eye.

One moment she was sliding down the chute at the convenience station, then she saw the outside—containers and stars—and then she was wrapped in a beam and ended up in this beautiful room.

Washu-chan must be worried...

Sasami gently touched her earring.

She thought she heard Mihoshi's voice while she was sliding, but she might have switched it off in her panic.

This big sister doesn't seem like such a bad person, but...

"What's wrong? If you're that worried, shall we pretend it wasn't a kidnapping? I'll let you go home whenever you want. It's a bit of a waste since I was finally getting excited, though. Do you really want to go back to that boring shuttle?"

When told so bluntly, Sasami felt like it would be a waste herself.

"I... was so scared my heart was pounding. No, it's not like that now. I don't really know myself. Hey, if I say I want to go home, will you really let me?"

"Sure."

The woman once again gave a melting smile.

"Even if I say right now?"

"That'd be a bit of a shame. Winnie, what do you think?"

"Are you asking for my opinion? Even though I haven't been introduced yet? Blondie, you really do whatever you want, don't you? I'm a well-mannered ship's computer. I'm not the type to barge in without an introduction. Besides, I'm busy with course calculations right now!"

A voice like a ringing bell was heard.

"And you were picked up from the scrap heap!"

The woman raised an eyebrow slightly.

"Fine. She’s a bit cranky. Winnie, this is Sasami-chan. Sasami-chan, the voice from the ceiling is this ship's computer. I'm Blondie. Is that enough?"

"Nice to meet you."

A hazy figure appeared in the center of the bridge.

About half the size of Sasami, it vibrated its transparent wings, wearing a sleeveless dress like a short tutu, with its slender legs crossed.

"I'm Winnie. This is a hologram. So don't touch it."

"So pretty..."

Sasami was entranced.

"Oh, thank you. You're cute too. By the way, do you really want to go home when I've just gone to the trouble of warping?"

"No..."

Sasami instinctively shook her head, but at the same time, another thought arose.

Is it okay for me to get along with a kidnapper?

Anyway, I have to tell Washu-chan not to worry.

Then... then I can have them send me home.

The sisters left me behind, so it's okay if I make them worry a little bit.

I feel bad for Washu-chan, but since the sisters left, she’s been acting like a mother. I know she's worried, but Sasami isn't a little child anymore.

"Um," Sasami answered while biting her nail.

"Can I use the ansible to call Washu-chan? To say Sasami is safe. And that I'm going to look for Ryo-Ohki."

"Ryo-Ohki!? You mean that legendary, vicious criminal battleship?"

A satisfied smile spread across Blondie’s cheeks.

"To tell you the truth, I was thinking it might be a bit of a pain to go all the way to Jurai to demand a ransom. Tell me more. Is it exciting?"

"I-I don't know if it is, but..."

Sasami stopped biting her nail and, feeling uneasy about telling a kidnapper such things, began plucking at the fuzz on a cushion.

"...Ryo-Ohki is with Tenchi-niichan right now."

Stars streamed past like arrows of light.

Ryo-Ohki was running through a cold dream, carrying an empty heart.

RYOKO IS GONE.

I CAN'T SEE HER.

WHY?

WHY DID SHE GO ALONE?

She tried calling through the Astral Link.

There was no answer.

THIS IS THE FIRST TIME.

Ryo-Ohki wanted to cry.

FOR RYOKO TO ABANDON RYO-OHKI.

WHAT HAPPENED?

WHY DID SHE LEAVE RYO-OHKI BEHIND?

Without an answer, Ryo-Ohki continued to call.

This was the point of the last communication.

Ryo-Ohki had obediently warped out according to Ryoko’s instructions.

She searched in all directions.

There was no biological or energy reaction.

TENCHI?

She expanded the search range.

The faint scent of an unknown energy field.

It was familiar.

This was from that... mysterious ship...?

"MEEEEWWWWWW!"

Her own cry echoed through the bridge.

RYOKO! RYOKO!!

TENCHI HAS BEEN... SNATCHED!?

Chapter Ten:
♪ Skip, Skip, Forevermore

♪ Skip, skip, forevermore

Chasing after the culprit

Skip, skip, it’s so much fun

Come and sing along with me♪

Humming a song that didn’t match her outfit at all—a sky-blue apron dress and a basket filled with gingham-check napkins—Mihoshi was skipping along with boundless energy.

"It’s almost time, so just wait for me."

Thinking of the sweets made her feet move faster naturally.

Emerging from a forest where sunlight filtered through the leaves, she ran up a small hill, and look! There it was!

A roof made of chocolate, bricks made of biscuits.

A fence lined with lollipops, marble chocolate gravel, and colorful candy flowers.

Her heart began to pound.

Oh, how many days had it been since she last ate something sweet?

This... all of this is mine.

How happy!

Itadakimas!

Just as she was about to bite into an ornamental cookie sparkling with granulated sugar—

"Mihoshi!"

A large, rock-hard shout crashed down onto her head.

"Mihoshi!! You really are something..."

Oh no! I’ve been found by the wicked witch.

Holding a blaster, she looks just like Kiyone... wait?

"Aww, I was just a little bit away..."

Mumbling to herself as she sat up, she saw a dumbfounded Kiyone and Ayeka with a cold, icy expression.

"What exactly were you 'a little bit away' from?"

Ayeka interrogated her in a voice even colder than her expression.

"I assume you’ve made contact with Washu-san?"

"Ah..."

Now that she mentioned it, they *had* talked about that.

Ayeka’s eyebrow twitched upward.

"While I was desperately negotiating, what on earth were you doing?"

"Well..."

She certainly couldn't admit to making small talk with a pirate.

That's right.

She had spent thirty minutes in the washroom while thinking about things as she washed her hands.

About Sasami-chan, Tenchi-san, Ryoko, and Seiran.

Thinking about it made her feel helpless, so she had prayed to the Ring of the Galaxy Academy.

What should I do?

Is Sasami-chan safe?

I wonder how Tenchi-san and Ryoko-san are doing.

When she opened her eyes, the mirror had suddenly looked bright.

In that bright light, she had heard her own voice saying it was going to be okay.

It might look like a terrible situation now, but our feelings aren't severed.

The bonds we’ve gathered across time and space aren't that fragile.

That was when she thought:

Everyone will surely come back.

What I can do is keep walking toward the light.

But if she said that, she'd probably be yelled at again for having no basis for it.

When she came back, Seiran was asleep, and watching him made her sleepy, too.

"...Sorry, I was sleeping."

Ayeka let out a sigh.

Everything, to an almost ridiculous degree, was going wrong.

Negotiations had broken down, and Kiyone was losing heart.

And when she returned, she found a pirate and a detective taking a nap together like old friends.

"I can see that!"

With a face that suggested her temper was about to flare, Ayeka looked at Seiran's boots, which were carelessly tossed onto the table.

"You too! Wake up, criminal!"

The boots hit the bench with a thud, and a sand-colored head rose with irritating slowness.

"I've been awake. I'd appreciate it if you stopped with the false accusations; I haven't even been indicted yet."

Seiran took a long stretch and turned toward Ayeka.

"If you keep getting angry like that, your Imperial beauty will go to waste."

Ayeka started to snap back but then furrowed her brow.

It was strange. Something was off.

Why was this pirate so calm...?

"Eeeek!"

Ayeka's scream shook the meeting room.

"Wh... what? What happened?"

"You... the handcuffs... where are the handcuffs!?"

Kiyone instinctively looked toward Seiran.

The handcuffs that had been tightly fastened just a moment ago were gone.

She immediately drew Mihoshi’s blaster and pointed it at him.

"Look," Seiran said, turning a look of blatant exhaustion toward them. "I’m not a monster or a beast. I’m not going to do anything, so just relax."

"Who on earth took them off? Kiyone-san, put them back on him immediately!"

Ayeka turned pale.

"Hurry! Anyone!"

She was stiff as she spoke. It seemed she genuinely loathed this pirate.

"Stop shouting," Seiran interrupted coolly. "This lovely detective here took them off for me. Don't make a fuss over nothing."

"Mihoshi did!?"

This time, Kiyone shouted.

"Mihoshi! What were you thinking?"

"Well... for the time being, I decided there was no danger..."

Mihoshi began to mumble, tears welling up.

"Oh, Kiyone-chan, you always start yelling like that..."

"It was you! Why do you always have to do something so unnecessary..."

"Even Ayeka-san too," Mihoshi replied, looking back at Ayeka with teary eyes in protest. "But he was so pitiful. This man is even more unhappy than we are. I can’t stand seeing unhappy people making themselves even unhappier."

Kiyone sighed.

That was it.

She should have known, yet she was always outmaneuvered by Mihoshi.

After all, Mihoshi was a genius who lived entirely on intuition and coincidence.

"Then what about me!?"

Ayeka, who couldn't stand not being first in everything, began to snap, but Kiyone restrained her and handed the blaster back to Mihoshi.

"Fine. Let's trust Mihoshi's intuition and count this as a favor. However, the fact remains that we *are* in a miserable spot. The Priest says he'd love to help, but they're on their way to some festival at a place called Trion, so they can't change their course. In other words, our fate is to either go all the way to that planet with them or get dropped off at some station. Seiran, which would you choose?"

"It doesn't make much difference to me," Seiran answered, but then he caught sight of a dejected Mihoshi and smiled.

"How about we hijack this caravan?"

"Good heavens!"

Ayeka looked up sharply.

"How despicable! A shameful act! That is such pirate-like behavior!"

"Quiet, already. If you're always this prickly, you'll never find a husband."

"What did you say!?"

"From what I see, that personality is what keeps men away. This Tenchi fellow must have had a lot of patience. He must be a saint under that exterior."

"Wh..."

Ayeka was speechless. Even Ryoko wouldn't go that far.

"Joking aside," Seiran continued with a cool face, ignoring the trembling Ayeka. "I'm going to sleep. Wake me when you've decided what to do. I'll cooperate with the investigation."

Seiran lay back down on the bench and closed his eyes.

"Wait! How dare you be so selfish! Take back everything you just said! To say all that and then just... are you listening?"

"Now, now, let's stop fighting. We were saved after all, and if we all think together, maybe there's a good way..." Mihoshi appealed in a pitiful voice.

"I have no interest in hearing from someone who was just napping!"

Seiran lifted his head slightly to look at Ayeka’s indignant face, but noticing Kiyone looking down at him, he gave a smirk.

"Why the sudden change of heart about cooperating?"

"I was moved by your cute partner."

Seiran propped himself up on one elbow and gestured with his chin toward the flustered Mihoshi.

"I’d be happy to repay the debt. Now, let me sleep."

Kiyone narrowed her eyes as she looked down at the composed pirate.

It was strange.

She had expected him to try to knock them all out and go looking for Ryoko, but when did his mind change?

"I don't know what you're planning, but don't forget that I am a detective."

Kiyone gave him a warning look, staying on guard.

"You seem quite sharp. Remember that for me, will you?"

Seiran spoke through a yawn and fell asleep with his arm as a pillow. No matter how much Ayeka shouted or cursed, he didn't even crack an eye for the next two hours.

"Ayeka-sama! Ayeka-sama!"

"We’ve made contact with Washu-san!"

"Please come to the bridge."

It was about two hours after the negotiations had failed when a loud transmission came from the Guardians, who had been using the caravan’s ansible to contact the shuttle.

When the makeshift investigation team—with Ayeka in the lead and Seiran bringing up the rear—arrived, Washu was waiting on the large screen in the center of the caravan’s bridge, arms crossed and smirking.

The Priest and Vice-Priest were also visible on the bridge.

"My, my," Washu started, shrugging her shoulders. "Anyway, Sasami-chan is safe. She’s doing great."

"You found her!?"

Ayeka asked with such force it seemed she might climb onto the console.

"Where is Sasami now? Did you catch the kidnapper?"

"Now, hold on. She’s coming on now."

With those words, the screen split, and a lively, freckled face appeared.

"Sasami!!"

"Sasami-chan!?"

Ayeka and Kiyone shouted simultaneously.

"Sister!"

Sasami grinned with a sheepish look and immediately began talking fast.

"You were worried? I’m sorry! I should have contacted you sooner, but I got distracted playing. Look, this is Mag. Isn't he cute? He washes his face just like Ryo-chan. He’s stuck to me and won’t let go."

On the screen, Sasami held up a pure white fluffy ball. In the middle of the ball were eyes like sapphires and a pink nose.

Ayeka stared blankly at the white furry creature for a moment before suddenly shaking her head.

"No! Where are you right now? Where is this? What on earth happened!?"

"Heh-heh. I wonder where?"

Sasami gave a slightly mischievous smile and nuzzled the fluffy ball.

"Here's a hint. It’s not inside a shop. There’s only one person and one animal with me. Oh, and one more person—a fairy. Now, where am I?"

"Sasami!!" Ayeka screamed. "This is no time for jokes! When I heard from Washu-san that you’d been kidnapped, I nearly lost my mind! Where are you? Tell me where you are so I can come get you!"

"You have to guess right."

Sasami turned her nose up and looked at Ayeka out of the corner of her eye.

"After all, you went off and left me behind, and you didn't contact me at all. I was waiting and waiting. Hey, where’s Tenchi-niichan? Where’s Ryo-chan? Where’s Ryoko-neichan?"

"Tenchi-sama is..."

The honest Ayeka was at a loss for words.

That’s... not a story for a child. Because...

"I already know," came the unexpected answer.

"Tenchi-niichan and Ryoko-neichan eloped, right? And then Ryo-chan went chasing after them, right? Washu-chan told me everything."

The mischievous grin turned back into a childlike smile.

"Sister, were you super-duper surprised? But I think everyone will definitely come back. After all, Tenchi-niichan’s home is the Masaki Shrine, and carrots only grow on Earth. So, since I’ve come all this way, I thought I’d play a little longer. If you don't answer by the time I count to ten, I’m cutting the ansible. One, two..."

"I will not allow it!!"

Ayeka shouted with all her might.

"Won't you listen to your sister? I’ll tell Father. You’ll be locked up in the Juraian Royal Palace! Sasami!?"

"But you forgot about me. Three, four..."

Cold sweat ran down Ayeka’s cheek.

"Sasami! Wait, a convenience station?"

"Bzzzzt! I said it wasn't a shop. Five, six..."

"Inside a spaceship!" Kiyone cut in desperately.

"A little bit bzzzt. Kiyone-san, Yukinojo was worried about you. Seven, eight..."

"The shuttle!"

"Bzzzt! Nine, te—"

"The bridge of the kidnapper's ship!!"

Mihoshi declared in a sudden soprano, and for a moment, it seemed even the beeping of the instruments stopped.

"Ding-dong! Correct! It’s really big and fancy in here. I’ve made friends, the chocolate is delicious, it’s just the best."

"Now, now, don't talk too much."

A sultry, singing alto voice echoed.

At the same time, a woman appeared with dazzling blonde hair and an aura so strong it seemed to cause halation on the screen.

Deep dark-green pupils were slit like a cat’s inside bright emerald irises.

From the corner of the bridge, the Priest’s muffled whisper of an incomprehensible word reached Ayeka’s ear.

If the figure she had seen in the holo was a "one," the real thing had power exceeding a "hundred."

"You... who are you? You’re completely different from the holo..." Ayeka’s voice was raspy.

"Oh, really? I usually keep it dialed down."

The woman laughed lightheartedly.

"If I walked around like this, every man alive would flock to me and probably lick my boots."

"Blondie..."

A voice that was almost a whisper came from behind Ayeka.

"It’s Blondie, isn't it?"

"Who is it?"

The woman leaned in as if peering into the screen.

"Seiran."

Seiran pushed past Kiyone to look up at the screen.

"I met you once at a bar in Lamed."

The woman furrowed her brow slightly but then relaxed.

"I don't remember. I must have been bored."

The woman stepped back into a split screen with Sasami.

"Anyway, I’m borrowing this girl for a while. She’s just so, so cute, I don't think I can let her go. She seems to like me too, so we're going to have some fun. We'll go to the shopping center at Castor & Pollux, shop at the Procyon Food Center, then cook tons of food and eat until we’re sleepy. Maybe a picnic in Mag’s homeland, or being supporters for Galaxy Super Dodgeball and making a scene. Of course, we might do some pirating too. We’ll blast a hole in a rich person’s cruising spacer and give them a scare that’ll freeze their faces stiff. Just thinking about being with this girl gets me excited. See ya!"

The woman waved her long fingers and left the screen.

"Wait! You... Blondie!"

Ayeka clenched her trembling hands.

"What do you think you're doing? Sasami is my sister! I must insist you return her! And Sasami, shame on you. Making friends with a pirate woman of unknown origin..."

"Oh, listen to you."

The reply came from off-screen.

"I come from a lineage much older than yours. A lineage that stretches back to the depths of darkness. If you’re a woman, you should compete with intelligence and beauty rather than lineage. Listening to you is making me bored. Come on, Sasami-chan."

"Sister, it’s okay," Sasami said, looking back at her sister apologetically.

"Blondie! If you keep being mean, I’ll tell Mom. That’s why I told you I didn't want you to be a pirate."

"Winnie, stop saying unnecessary things!"

A fast-talking, bell-like voice was heard, and then Blondie’s silver-manicured finger reached out and turned off the screen, cutting off the smiling Sasami.

The screen returned to showing Washu.

"Well, what should we do?"

Washu shook her red hair, arms still crossed.

"I was thinking of heading to Jurai for now, but what about you all? Going to hitchhike?"

"Washu-san!!"

Tears fell from Ayeka's eyes.

"It's too much... what did I ever do?"

"Oh? Who was it that left her cute little sister behind and went off?" Washu replied calmly. "Unfortunately, I've wasted a lot of time looking through Yukinojo's data. I guess living on Earth for so long has made me soft. If you wanted to know if Sasami was safe, you should have just asked Tsunami. That girl is being protected by Tsunami, so... whew, I'm exhausted."

"Tsunami is..." Ayeka repeated, speechless.

Truly? The guardian deity of our Juraian Royal Family is protecting Sasami instead of me?

"You don't believe me," Washu muttered mischievously. "Who do you think you are? Do you think every existence in the universe will tell you the truth the moment they open their mouths? Well, in any case, there's no need to worry about Sasami-chan. She'll come back when she's tired of playing, surely. It might be good for her to get out from under her sister's thumb and stretch her wings for once. She really was doing her best."

"But the kidnapping..." Ayeka persisted. She felt as though the entire world was being cruel to her.

"It's not a kidnapping anymore," Washu cut her off. "There's no kidnapper who sends their name and ansible number and says to call whenever there's a need. Oh right, here's the number."

Washu transmitted a series of codes, and the numbers danced at the bottom of the screen.

"The rest is up to you. If you're going to Jurai, I can pick you up, but I have no intention of going looking for Lord Tenchi or chasing after Sasami-chan. I have things I want to do myself. What is it, Yukinojo?"

A window opened on the screen, and Yukinojo appeared.

"Mihoshi-dono, Kiyone-dono. It is our duty to report the subsequent progress. It would be problematic if you did not return to the shuttle soon."

"I know," Kiyone sighed.

She thought she understood Washu's whims well enough, but this time she didn't understand the reason.

"Washu-san, as a First-Class Detective, I am officially requesting your cooperation. I'll send the coordinates, so please pick us up. If you refuse, it will be obstruction of official business and embezzlement..."

"Don't say such boring things."

Washu waved her hand with a laugh.

"If I were going to hijack a Galaxy Police shuttle, I'd have done it long ago. Besides, you're the ones who left, not me. I'll hand you over to Yukinojo now."

Washu disappeared from the screen, and Yukinojo appeared. As she listened to Kiyone's voice coordinating the rendezvous point with the caravan crew, Ayeka stared blankly at the screen, her face looking as if she had aged ten years.

Me... me... was I wrong about something?

I only did what I thought was right at the time, just as I always have.

Ayeka questioned herself awkwardly in her heart.

I didn't have time to think about Sasami. Washu-san was there, and I didn't leave her alone. I thought Sasami would understand. And yet, she went and made friends with a woman like that, whose background is completely unknown...

"Ayeka-san?"

Startled, she turned to see Mihoshi standing there looking worried.

"You shouldn't blame yourself. Sasami-chan is a smart girl, so she'll come back. Blondie-san doesn't seem like a bad person, and Washu-san is coming to get us, so there's no need to worry so much."

Comforted by words that were the opposite of her inner thoughts, Ayeka was still dazed when Mihoshi smiled and walked away.

Why? Why can she think that way?

How can she believe in people so easily?

Ayeka felt like crying out of sheer frustration.

Washu-san is irresponsible too. To say she'll come back when she's bored... how can anyone be so careless? Sasami is still a child. She is my sister. And yet... at this rate, the kidnapper seems more right than I am!?

Her vision blurred, and Ayeka hurriedly rubbed her eyes.

In the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of sand-colored hair.

It was Seiran.

He was leaning against the bridge wall with a smirk on his face.

"Good to see she's safe."

Ayeka turned around with a shudder. He must have been watching the whole time.

I've shown my weakness!

"Why do you look like that?" Seiran continued. "Can you only believe in yourself? Are you dissatisfied because things didn't go your way? Things turned out better than you imagined. I think the outcome is far too generous for someone who did nothing but scream and shout at people."

Ayeka's expression hardened.

"I have no reason to be lectured by the likes of you. You were useless!"

Seiran shrugged. "As you say. You are impressive. You charge straight toward your goal. If there's an obstacle, you crush it with force. You have the brain to plot, too. If you could just do something about that flash-boiling temper of yours, you'd be a perfect princess. But I can't say you're perfect for winning a prince's heart."

Blood rushed to Ayeka's cheeks.

"Insolent! It is not for the likes of you to give me advice."

"There it is again."

Seiran looked down at Ayeka calmly. "You think if you shout, things will go your way. Like a child who thinks they can buy anything if they stomp their feet. It's

not hard to imagine that everyone around you has let you have your way. Do you plan to shout at the prince like that when he returns? Don't you want to be loved?"

Ayeka gasped, taken aback by the unexpected words. Seiran watched carefully as agitation spread across her face.

"Princess," he said, lowering his voice intentionally. "I have a prophecy for you. The prince will surely return. Do you believe it?"

Ayeka stared at Seiran’s face as if hypnotized.

"A woman who can only believe in herself can't possibly fall in love. I suppose you’ll never change."

Seiran turned away coldly.

"No!"

Ayeka took a step forward.

"I... must believe."

Her tone was filled with hesitation.

"Believe in what?" Seiran asked back coldly.

How naive, he thought, laughter bubbling up inside him.

"...In your words."

Seiran turned back slowly. "I will do my best for you. You must listen to what I say. If you want to gain the prince’s love."

At that moment, a warning tone for a warp-out alerted the bridge.

"It’s Washu-san!"

The familiar shuttle appeared on the screen. Seiran stepped back and watched Ayeka as she ran off.

Yes, when you think about it, she’s a cute woman, Seiran smirked.

It’s better to have her be useful than to have her screaming pointlessly. In fact, she practically negotiated for my sake.

You chase the prince, and I’ll chase Ryoko. That way, everything works out perfectly.

"Thank you for everything."

Ayeka bowed gracefully. "I will never forget the kindness of the Priest and everyone in the caravan. I apologize for my many rudenesses and wish to offer a small token of gratitude from the Juraian Royal Family at a later date."

"No, no, I am only sorry I could not be of more help," the Priest urged Ayeka to raise her head. "Departure is imminent, so I will keep this brief, but you will soon be caught in a great whirlpool. By breaking your vows, you have chosen this yourself. Lord Tsukuyomi favors chaos and fertility. It is likely something that cannot be handled by the strength of one person alone. I do not know if it will be useful, but I will give you this."

The Priest took off the ring of the Galaxy Academy from his arm and handed it to Ayeka.

"Pray together with one heart. It is a talisman that calls forth the miracle of love. You must never use it alone."

An announcement of completion of preparations echoed through the hallway.

"Why is that?" Ayeka asked as she hurried toward the airlock, urged by the Priest.

"Because those who devour love are devoured by love."

The Priest stopped and placed a hand on Ayeka’s shoulder. He clearly knew something and was hesitant about whether to say it. But in the end, the Priest seemed to decide to say nothing.

"May the Holy Light grant forgiveness to the young ones."

The airlock opened, swallowed Ayeka and the others, and closed slowly.

Chapter Eleven:
I Woke to the Scent of the Wind

I woke to the scent of the wind.

It was a breeze carrying the sweet fragrance of flowers.

"……Ryoko?"

Tenchi opened his eyes slightly, but hurried to close them again at the sheer blueness of the sky.

A blue sky!?

Where is this?

Tenchi bolted upright.

His heart was pounding so hard it felt sickening.

"Calm down… just calm down."

He told himself.

"I'm breathing. Nothing hurts particularly. My arms and legs are all still there."

Tenchi sat on the reddish-brown ground and timidly surveyed his surroundings.

It looked like Earth after a nuclear war.

…Like something out of a movie or an anime he'd seen once.

Tenchi added that thought to himself with a twitch of his lip.

As far as the eye could see: a wasteland.

Half-melted buildings, factories reduced to crumbling heaps of rubble, and roads where the cracked asphalt revealed ash-like soil underneath.

Stunted trees and discolored grass grew sparsely, as if trying to shroud the ruins.

"Ryo…… Ryoko!!"

Tenchi sprang to his feet.

"Where is this? What is this place!?"

He desperately fought the urge to just start running and looked around frantically.

Suddenly, a realization weighed down on his heart like a lead sinker.

That’s right.

Ryoko isn't here.

She left.

Tenchi stared blankly at the horizon.

There was no sign of any living creature.

He couldn't even imagine anything living here.

And yet, a creeping dread made his spine tingle.

"Is someone……?"

Tenchi spun around quickly, feeling as though something—an animal or a human—had heard his voice.

He thought he saw something move among the rubble and instinctively backed away.

Then, a dry, scraping sound came from behind him—where nothing should have been a moment ago.

His heart leaped.

He turned fast, only to see a shrub’s branch scraping against a shard of melted glass.

Cold sweat broke out on Tenchi’s forehead.

He cast one more fearful glance around and broke into a full sprint.

He felt like he was losing his mind.

Could this be…… Earth in the future?

Running toward an open area, Tenchi’s eyes darted toward every shadow in sheer terror.

No, that's impossible. Skipping through time—that's just ridiculous. Surely, there was a mistake and I got pulled into some other planet… Ryoko or Ryo-Ohki will be here to find me any second.

His breath grew ragged and his lungs felt like they were burning before he finally came to a stop.

Calm down… get a grip!

Tenchi repeated it to himself like a protective spell.

If he kept this up, he'd exhaust himself and be unable to move.

He needed to find a weapon. He needed to find a safe place.

Right now.

Having a goal helped Tenchi regain a shred of composure. He looked around.

He spotted a rusted iron bar sticking out from the rubble.

Tenchi approached it cautiously and tried to pull it out.

It was snagged on a chunk of concrete and wouldn't budge easily.

He threw himself into the task, and after a great struggle, he managed to pull out an iron bar about a meter long.

He took a mid-level stance and gave it a light test swing.

It was heavy, but in a pinch, it could at least serve for self-defense.

Tenchi started to take the stance for the Divine Light Hawk Sword, but then he suddenly tossed the iron bar aside.

I'm an idiot! I can use the Divine Light Hawk Sword*, can't I?*

He had been so busy trembling like a mouse that he hadn't even remembered.

The tension drained from his body.

He brought his palms together lightly, closed his eyes, and concentrated his spirit on the space between his brows.

He expected to feel that sensation of his palms growing warm, followed by the appearance of the blade of light.

Tenchi opened his eyes, puzzled.

He felt nothing in his palms.

"……That's strange."

He could do it when he was facing off against Seiran on Ryo-Ohki's bridge.

Maybe his concentration had slipped because he'd been slacking on his training.

Tenchi steadied his breathing and unified his spirit, just as he did before practice.

He touched his hands together lightly and pulled them slightly apart.

Nothing happened.

Not even a spark.

Tenchi snapped his eyes open and stared at his hands in utter shock.

I can't use the Divine Light Hawk Sword……*!?*

The wind shifted, bringing the smell of oxidized earth.

Tenchi picked up the iron bar and began to walk dejectedly.

Calm down, think.

He told himself, but the shock made it hard to gather his thoughts.

I've always been able to use it when it mattered. It's fine if I can't use it right this second. There's no immediate danger, and no one is hunting me. Though, come to think of it, the fight with Kagato was the first and last time I actually used the Divine Light Hawk Sword……

No way!?

Tenchi stopped in his tracks.

How can I be this unreliable!?

He had never thought of himself as a prince, let alone a hero, but being all alone like this made him realize just how much he had relied on his Grandpa and Dad.

What am I supposed to do?

In this—Tenchi looked out over the wasteland—strange land that looked so much like Earth.

He had been walking along the slope of a gentle hill; the only thing he could hear was the sound of the wind.

I'll head for the top of the hill.

Tenchi decided out of desperation.

He might see something from a high vantage point, and if Ryoko came looking for him, he'd be easier to spot.

Trying hard not to think of other possibilities—like being found by something that *wasn't* Ryoko—Tenchi began to trudge up the hill.

When he reached the summit, he saw something he hadn't seen before.

A large, two-story house with a shed roof.

Something he could never mistake, even at the edge of the universe.

There, in the desolate land at the foot of the hill, stood something that shouldn't exist.

It's my house……

Tenchi's knees actually shook.

Why? Why is it here?

My house is right there.

Is this some kind of prank?

A phantom?

The common sense he had cultivated for sixteen years, the logic that maintained his mental balance, the standard values that kept his heart level—everything Tenchi relied on crumbled away like sand.

This is a dream.

Despite the urge to turn on his heel and run away from what he saw below, Tenchi couldn't take his eyes off the Masaki residence.

I'm just in the middle of a nightmare.

He desperately convinced himself.

If it’s a dream, anything can happen. Sometimes truths you didn't know are hidden in dreams. That’s right—what good does it do to run away even in a dream?

Tenchi gripped the iron bar—shuddering at how strangely real it felt in his hand—and resolutely began to descend the hill.

Whatever was inside that house, he wouldn't run.

It was just a dream anyway.

He’d brace himself and see whatever came out.

Tenchi marched down the path with the stiff determination of a child entering a haunted house, but when he got within ten paces, his legs suddenly froze.

The Masaki house looked as though it had been exposed to the elements for years; the paint was peeling, and the weatherboards were warped.

It smelled like a house that had been abandoned for a long time.

The dry dust whipped up by the wind might have added to that impression.

There was no sign of the Guardians that usually stood like a gatepost.

What was I expecting!?

Tenchi thought, moving past shock into a mood where he almost wanted to laugh.

Was I hoping for a vision of laundry fluttering in the wind, happy laughter coming from inside, and the good smell of lunch drifting out?

It was no use standing here.

He had to go in.

He had to go in and find out.

Tenchi forced his feet to move and reached for the front door.

Suddenly, an unutterable terror seized his whole body.

If I open this door, the dream will become reality.

I’ll never be able to go back to that house on Earth again.

It’s a trap!

Tenchi turned and ran without looking back.

He circled the hill, running desperately while tripping over piles of rubble.

He finally stopped when he realized the scenery around him had changed.

He had no sense of direction, but he must have put considerable distance between himself and that house.

Tenchi looked up at the sky; there was a sun just like on Earth.

A strangely large, white sun hung in the middle of the sky, casting a faint shadow at his feet…

Tenchi gasped and looked up again.

It wasn't the sun.

It was the moon!?

Then, a gust of wind rose, bringing with it the smell of the abandoned house he should have left far behind.

He turned around fearfully, and there, barely ten paces behind him, was the Masaki house, looking exactly as it had before.

Tenchi’s strength left him, and he nearly collapsed where he stood.

He didn't understand anything anymore.

In an alien land with a moon in a blue sky, he turns around and finds his own home.

Am I cursed?

Tenchi stood for a long time, staring at the Masaki house.

The house just sat there.

It didn't collapse, and there was no sign of anything coming out.

Tenchi finally made up his mind.

Things weren't going to change unless he went in.

All right.

I'm going in.

If that's how it's going to be……

Tenchi furrowed his brow, tensing up even more than before, and reached for the door.

It seemed to be unlocked.

He swung it open all at once.

The house was dead silent.

The jumble of women's shoes that usually lined the entryway was gone, leaving it completely empty.

A thick layer of dust had settled in the hallway; Tenchi saw his fingerprints leave clear marks, and then reluctantly stepped up without taking off his shoes.

Holding his iron bar cautiously, he peered into the living room.

A sofa that looked decayed sat upon a carpet that looked equally rotted.

The houseplants Ayeka had tended so carefully were withered and dead, and the TV sat under a layer of dust like oversized garbage, lost in an eternal sleep.

What happened to everything?

Tenchi looked around the living room, feeling lost.

His eyes fell on the storage space under the stairs.

The door that led to Washu-san's lab.

Tenchi had a sudden thought and opened the storage door.

Inside was just a closet full of cleaning supplies.

No, there was something.

Tenchi picked up a small note.

Goodbye, Tenchi-dono.

He could read the neatly typed letters.

Washu-san!?

Tenchi hurriedly closed the storage door and headed for the kitchen.

On the table, which sat dust-covered but neatly arranged, was a note written in large, childlike letters.

Bye-bye, Tenchi-niichan.

In the eight-mat room on the second floor that had been Ayeka's, he found a letter in an envelope.

Goodbye, Tenchi-sama.

Only those words were written in a delicate hand on faded stationery.

Tenchi bolted out of the empty room and opened the door to his own room.

The bed and desk he thought had been loaded onto Ryo-Ohki were there in their familiar spots.

A piece of paper, seemingly torn from a notebook, lay folded on the pillow.

G'bye, Tenchi.

It was Ryoko's handwriting.

He had never even seen Ryoko's handwriting, but he knew for certain these were Ryoko's words.

A muffled groan escaped Tenchi's throat.

G'bye? Goodbye!?

Tenchi knelt by the bed and read the penciled note over and over.

This is a nightmare.

To be all alone in the house I finally returned to.

What on earth happened?

Why did everyone leave?

Tenchi stared blankly at the wrinkles in the sheets he had made, still clutching the note.

The house that had always echoed with laughter and shouting was now hushed and still, as if even the fact that Tenchi had been born and raised here was being swallowed up under the dust.

And then I'll be gone, too.

Tenchi shuddered.

Nothing would remain.

Every living thing had left, one by one, and soon even this house would return to dust.

Tenchi felt an unbearable sensation and stood up.

He fled the room.

As soon as he left, the outlines of the room began to melt soundlessly behind him.

As he stumbled down the stairs, the steps vanished one by one.

If he had turned around, he might have seen it, but Tenchi held tightly to Ryoko's note as he ran through the hallway, out the wide-open front door, and into the open air.

He felt a shift in the air behind him and turned around for the first time.

What he thought had moved was just the wind.

His house had vanished without a trace.

The wind kicked up the dust again.

Tenchi stared vacantly at the space where his house should have been.

There was no mark on the soil.

A phantom……

His lips moved on their own, whispering words devoid of emotion.

It was a phantom.

A dream or a phantom—it didn't make much difference.

A dream that seemed to have forgotten how to wake up, or reality.

Was he awake now, or was he sleeping?

Was he still wandering through sub-space after parting with Ryoko?

Where should I go?

Tenchi thought idly, and suddenly remembered he'd left the iron bar inside the house.

Where was it? Did it vanish too?

Tenchi looked over the reddish soil and found the iron bar lying about ten paces away.

It hadn't vanished.

Therefore, this iron bar was real.

Tenchi bent down to pick it up and realized he was still holding a letter in his right hand.

Ryoko's letter!

Therefore, this was also real.

He opened it, but what was written there wasn't a letter.

To the Last Manor.

Words like a riddle were written in a handwriting he didn't recognize.

His sense of reality grew thin once again.

Tenchi discarded the letter with the mysterious words and picked up the iron bar.

For now, this was the only solid touch of reality he had.

What was he supposed to do at the "Last Manor"?

Was he being told to go?

What was the "Last Manor"?

Tenchi gripped the iron bar as if the answer lay there and looked once more over the spot where his house had stood.

Then he turned on his heel, looked up at the white moon, and began to walk—followed by his own faint shadow—toward where the moon was setting.

Ryoko sat on a small plateau of an asteroid, hugging her knees. Exposed to the vacuum, she watched the stars drift slowly by.

She planned to let herself drift until she was about to collide with some planet or until a ship worth playing with passed by.

A nap would change her mood.

Ryoko's body, enveloped in a shield, emitted a faint, dim glow, looking like a strange bioluminescent insect clinging to the rocks.

I'll take a nap.

I did something stupid.

There was no way Tenchi was going to say yes.

I've never even seriously thought about marriage.

Competing with that damn Ayeka was just something I did because it was fun.

When I asked him to live together, Tenchi really did look troubled.

He was thinking hard.

He thought and thought about how to say it without hurting me, and finally, he said it out of sheer desperation.

"I'm sorry, Ryoko."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, Ryoko," he said.

He should have just said clearly that he didn't want to!

Tears she hadn't shown in front of Tenchi rolled down her cheeks.

Tch—my tear ducts are getting weak lately.

When she was a pirate, when she was drifting inside the shrine—she never had a habit of crying.

It started after she met Tenchi.

After meeting Tenchi, she learned for the first time what it was to cry, to laugh, to feel her heart pounding or her chest aching.

She hadn't even known tears existed for a long, long time……

"I want to see him."

Just one more time, I want to see Tenchi.

I want to teleport right now just to see his face.

Even from a distance is fine. Then I'll be a pirate again and race across the frozen sea of stars.

If Seiran chases me, I might stop for just a second.

Just long enough to stick my tongue out at him.

I have Ryo-Ohki.

Once she drops Tenchi off at Earth, I'll just have her fly back to me.

We can go back to how we were in no time.

After all, me and Ryo-Ohki are the terror of the seven seas, space pirates with 247 prior convictions.

Me and Ryo-Ohki will race across the universe forever in search of treasure.

I'll be the only one on the bridge.

Just me.

All alone……

Tears flooded out, and Ryoko had to bury her face in her knees to stifle her sobs.

I'm such an idiot.

If I hadn't said that, if I hadn't kidnapped Tenchi, I could have stayed in the dream forever.

I could have just married Seiran.

I could have just run away again afterward.

Marriage—all you do is say "Yes, I do," right?

Then why is it that only Tenchi is no good?

Ryoko looked up.

She had known the answer for a long time.

Tenchi was the first dream she'd ever had.

He was the first life to appear in her world, which had only consisted of stars and darkness and light.

He was different from Kagato or Seiran; he was like a gravitational pull wrapped in the green aura of Earth.

That's why she shouldn't have gotten close.

Tenchi…… unlike her, he wasn't alone. He had a family, a house, a school, friends, and companions.

Like a potted plant that withers if you pull it out by force.

Ryoko, unable to sleep, tried to measure her coordinates by the positions of the stars.

Ryo-Ohki probably found Tenchi by now.

I wonder where she's flying.

Since I'm not there, she's at half power, so of course she hasn't reached Earth yet, but maybe I'll check in for just a second.

The moment she opened the astral link she had closed—

RYOKOOOOOOOO!

Suddenly, Ryo-Ohki's scream raced through the gem on her wrist.

TENCHI, TENCHI WAS SNATCHED!

HURRY! RYO-OHKI IS HERE!

I'M WHERE RYOKO TOLD ME TO WAIT.

HURRY!

The transmission vibrated through Ryoko's body over and over.

"Ryo-Ohki!"

She called out with maximum power.

Tenchi was snatched!?

By who? When?

"I’m coming! Wait for me!!"

Ryoko stood up.

She kicked off the asteroid and floated into the void.

Her pupils slit into gold, and her lips pulled into a tight line.

An instant later, Ryoko vanished.

Is this a dream?

Or reality?

Tenchi walked slowly, his feet crunching on the broken concrete.

The moon was setting behind the ruins.

It was getting quite dark, and Tenchi’s hope that the setting moon would bring a real morning was being soundly crushed.

It felt as though he were sinking into a dream from which he would never wake.

Haven't I walked far enough?

Tenchi stopped and strained his eyes into the approaching gloom.

The scenery around him hadn't changed much.

There were fewer buildings, but he couldn't even make out their outlines unless he looked closely.

Occasionally, something would look strangely clear: a sign he’d seen on the way to school, a broken telephone pole, a statue from a fast-food restaurant.

As before, there were no humans, nor even any signs of life.

Just how far do I have to walk?

For a long time now, he’d stopped thinking about questions that had no answers, but Tenchi regretted throwing away the letter that might have been his only clue.

If this were a game, it would be a "kusoge" (crap game)[1]*.*

Tenchi thought with a sudden flare of anger.

Suddenly being warped to an unknown land.

Walking and walking without meeting a single soul.

The only information makes no sense.

It might be better that no monsters are attacking, but that means no leveling up, either.

If I die here, it's Game Over.

Tenchi shuddered at his own conclusion.

Is someone playing a game where the rules are invisible?

Come to think of it, he wasn't hungry or thirsty.

He didn't even need to use the bathroom.

If I'm not sleeping, I might as well be dead, he thought.

Thinking it didn't reveal anything or change his situation, but stopping to think helped him see things a little more clearly.

The person (though he didn't know if it was a person) who wrote those mysterious words at least knows about me.

They know, and they're watching me walk like this from somewhere.

They aren't just watching; they're waiting.

Waiting for me to find the [Last Manor].

Ironically, the moment he thought about his stomach, it began to growl.

He was thirsty, too, and he did need to use the bathroom.

Tenchi slipped behind some rubble and relieved himself.

Oh, now I don't know again.

He muttered with a sheepish look.

---

[1] This is a genre of highly satirical nonsensical games like the cho ainiki series.Basicly a trollishly brain rot game.

If this really were a dream, there's no way I could pee in it.

The rule is that you look and look for a bathroom, and when you finally find one, it's being cleaned, or it's locked, or it's already occupied.

You only wake up when things get desperate and your bladder is about to burst.

Well, whatever. At least I feel a bit better.

Tenchi thought, but this in itself was pathetic in a different way.

Night was coming, and none of his problems were solved.

Tenchi had no idea what would come out once night fell in a world where the moon was out during the day.

Not just what was in the sky—something might come out on the ground, too.

For example…… monsters, or ghosts, or spirits.

Speak of the devil, Tenchi thought.

The wind suddenly shifted, bringing the sweet scent of flowers.

What's this? A carnivorous plant!?

His mind went there because of the association with ghosts, but Tenchi immediately corrected the feeling.

Sweet…… a much richer scent.

Roses, or jasmine, or lilies—a heavy scent like that.

If it were a girl, she might call it a "floral note," but Tenchi had no experience with perfume, so he only thought of it this way.

If there are flowers blooming in these ruins, there must be people! I might meet someone.

Tenchi began to walk, following the scent.

He naturally quickened his pace, worried the wind might change again.

Tenchi had no memory of where the scenery had shifted.

The sweet scent grew steadily stronger.

There it was, in a valley at the bottom of a gentle slope.

A large stone building that looked more like a monastery than a Western-style manor.

Various flowers bloomed in profusion around the building, their pale forms rising out of the darkness.

I finally get to meet someone!?

Overjoyed, Tenchi forgot his caution and knocked on the heavy oak door.

"Excuse me! I'm not a suspicious person. Is anyone there?"

Immediately, a lantern was thrust out of a small peephole, illuminating Tenchi's face.

A murmur of wonder escaped the throat of the hooded figure.

A man…… it's a man…… the last man……!

The murmurs overlapped and spread like the light sound of wings. Just as he thought the lantern was being withdrawn, the oak door creaked open.

"Welcome to the Last Manor, Master."

The lantern light cast a circle on the cobblestones. A small woman wearing a nun-like robe stepped forward and bowed gracefully.

"We have been waiting for you. Please, come inside."

When she raised her head, her pale face looked up at Tenchi with the rapt expression of an evening primrose blooming in the twilight.

Chapter Twelve:
The Rustle of Silk Upon the Stone...

The sound of silk brushing against stone echoed softly—a gentle *sara-sara*.

Inside the chapel, where the candlelight flickered unsteadily, Tenchi followed fearfully behind a woman clad in a robe as dark as the night itself.

"Master... that person... he's so young... look, look, how adorable..."

From behind the pillars came the suppressed, excited whispers of women, overlapping like a round.

He couldn't see them, but there seemed to be many.

Tenchi gripped his iron bar tightly, unable to swallow the lump of anxiety stuck in his throat as he scanned his surroundings.

The atmosphere was solemn, exactly like a medieval church he'd seen in movies.

Is this really a church?

He couldn't see the altar; the woman walking ahead blocked his view, and the front of the room was shrouded in darkness.

If it were a church, there should be a crucifix or an altarpiece.

"Um, excuse me..."

Just as Tenchi tried to speak, the woman suddenly turned right, and his field of vision opened up.

A book lay open upon a gray altar, emitting a faint glow.

Behind the altar, a deep navy tapestry hung in the shadows, embroidered with golden thread in the shape of a radiating halo.

The candelabras were unlit, so that was all he could manage to make out.

"Wait!?"

It looks familiar somehow...

In the meantime, the woman opened a door beneath the right staircase leading to the mezzanine gallery and looked back, beckoning Tenchi.

"This way, Master."

Tenchi hurried after her at a trot.

Beyond the door lay a corridor surrounding a small courtyard.

After passing through the dim corridor dotted with stone benches, Tenchi was led into a room that was strangely like a luxury suite.

Cabriole-leg tables and sofas, elegant furniture, a large double bed, a mirror bordered with arabesque patterns, and deep crimson curtains at the window... if it wasn't a hotel, it looked like a movie set.

"Please, make yourself at home. The servants will bring drinks shortly."

The woman pointed Tenchi toward the sofa, then sat down beside him and scrutinized his face intently.

"Hehe."

"???"

Tenchi felt an instinctive fear and pulled back.

"W-What is it!?"

"So cute."

The woman flipped back her hood, and glossy chestnut hair spilled out.

"Your name is Tenchi, right? I'm Primrose. Here, throw that filthy thing away."

The woman calling herself Primrose took the iron bar from Tenchi's hand and leaned closer.

She was quite a beauty, with large hazel eyes and skin so white it looked translucent.

"We shall serve you to your heart's content. In this world where love has died out, you are, after all, the final one. You may do whatever you wish. Everything shall be as you desire, Master. That is what the Mistress of the Manor said."

Primrose gazed at Tenchi with a rapt, feverish look and whispered softly.

"You were lonely, weren't you?"

The iron bar slipped from the woman's hand and made a dull thud on the carpet.

"You may kiss me."

Her cherry-pink lips appealed to Tenchi's instincts, beckoning him.

"W-W-Wait a sec!"

In a tense situation that threatened to shut down his brain entirely, Tenchi finally managed to say that much and pushed the woman back.

"I-I need a proper explanation..."

Just then, there was a knock at the door.

"Pardon us."

With those words, a procession of women filed in.

"No fair getting a head start, Primrose," said a woman carrying a tray with a crystal decanter and glasses.

Another woman, reverently holding a navy silk gown, knelt before Tenchi.

"Master, the bath is ready."

"We shall attend to you."

Twin women, each holding a bathrobe and towel, knelt on either side of Tenchi.

"A drink, please. It is a fruit wine we made ourselves."

A transparent, ruby-colored liquid was poured into a glass, and the sweet aroma of apples wafted up.

Tenchi's head spun.

His thirst was certainly desperate enough that he wouldn't care if it were water or wine.

But in this situation—surrounded by unknown women in an unknown place and being offered alcohol—could he really just accept it?

"I-I..."

Tenchi felt a sense of déjà vu.

A familiar situation that had repeated itself over and over in his life.

A bouquet of love held in full arms, and a smile.

Words of love whispered, asking to be plucked and tasted.

And his own image, backing away from a plate full of delicacies like a suspicious stray dog.

Like a timid child watching for a chance to flee at any moment, he was always lacking confidence, always wishing for nothing to happen—that was his life.

Without a word, Tenchi snatched the glass and drained it in one gulp.

A sensation he had never tasted before—sweetness with a hint of bitterness dissolved within—slid down his parched throat.

"It's good..."

The women laughed like a rustling breeze.

"If it pleases you, would you like another?"

"We are so happy to have pleased the Master."

A second glass was poured, and a handkerchief as soft as a swaddling cloth gently wiped Tenchi's lips.

Tenchi drank the second glass as encouraged and looked around at the women while still holding it.

Their navy robes were all the same, but their faces were each distinctively lovely, like flowers blooming in a garden.

"I am Marigold."

The blonde woman who had poured the wine smiled.

"I am Moonshade."

The woman holding the gown looked up at Tenchi.

"We are Viola and Violet."

The twins looked at each other and laughed.

"But you may call us whatever you like."

Primrose took Tenchi's hand and received the glass.

"Come, let us show you the way."

Surrounded by the women and feeling like he was in a dream, Tenchi was led out of the room by the hand.

After circling the corridor again and passing through another passage, he smelled the scent of water.

It's huge...

The bathing facility—which looked more like a spa or a water park than a traditional bath—loomed white under the night shadows.

Perhaps because he'd downed two glasses on an empty stomach, even though it was fruit wine, it was honestly starting to hit him.

Actually, while walking here surrounded by the women, Tenchi had thought several times about asking.

What was the Last Manor?

What kind of world was this?

Why did they know his name?

The "I-I need a proper explanation..." part.

But as he walked, it had ceased to matter.

It felt as though the mainspring that had been wound tight with tension had completely unraveled.

Tenchi gazed comfortably at the paradise of water where the steam wafted.

The white marble pillars and sculptures made it look like a high-class hotel, but there was no doubt that soaking in such a vast bath alone would wash away his fatigue.

Tenchi turned back to the women.

Since they had been so kind, it was only natural to thank them.

"Thanks, everyone..."

As Tenchi started to speak, the women broke into a chorus of laughter.

And then, they cast off their navy robes.

Beneath, their bodies were revealed one after another, clad in dresses made of layered, translucent fabric like the wings of a mayfly.

It was an unbelievable sight, like a swarm of cicadas molting all at once in the moonlight.

"Now, Master."

Hands reached out from all directions, and in an instant, Tenchi's clothes were vanished like a magic trick.

He had no memory of even stepping out of them; even thinking about it later, he couldn't figure out how they had removed every last piece.

"One, two..."

Splash!!

Tenchi fell with a massive spray of water, and at almost the same moment—he thought—the women who had pushed him in jumped in with cheers.

White arms entwined around Tenchi's; the back of his head was supported by cushions that were too precious to be called mere flesh; both his legs were supported by a force other than buoyancy. Tenchi floundered like an upturned turtle.

"Wait a minute..."

"What is it, Master?"

"Is something wrong?"

Flushed cheeks and lips pressed in closer.

"Let go..."

His voice had gone raspy.

The women's dresses clung tightly to their wet skin, becoming so translucent that every curve down to the indentation of their navels was visible.

To give an idea of how much was visible: it made one instinctively want to test exactly how many centimeters the cloth would need to be lifted to let air in.

Especially where the bountiful twin peaks suggested deep rose-colored summits beneath the veil.

Tenchi forced himself to push the thought of the distant foothills beneath those two peaks out of his head.

He was already dizzy enough; if he tried to explore all the way to the headwaters, he would surely be struck by lightning and die.

Yes, it's a divine punishment, he thought, his brain melting like chocolate in the sun.

If this is a punishment, I don't mind dying like this. If it's a curse, let me be cursed to the depths of hell.

Born as a man sixteen years ago, he might now be able to traverse the path he had always lost his way on in dreams.

At that thought, while surrounded by six women—no, because he had been so thoroughly spoiled and suppressed by those too close to him—his masculine instincts revived like a sharpened blade.

That's right, I'll go all the way.

It's okay, isn't it?

"What are you thinking about?"

"Is it about me?"

"About me?"

"About me?"

As Tenchi opened his lips to answer, the women's lips passed over his one after another in a touch-and-go fashion.

Tenchi said nothing more.

Instead, he rose up, splashing water, and caught the woman closest to him.

Glossy chestnut hair... he had forgotten her name... right, she called herself Primrose.

Primrose arched her white throat and let out a honey-like gasp.

"I'm so happy... Master, feel me more..."

When he touched the peak closest to her heart, his hand actually trembled.

At the enchanting sensation, the transient, reason-like cloth separating his fingertips from her smooth skin immediately became an obstacle.

Tenchi hooked his fingers into the thin dress and, without a moment to think about what he was doing, ripped it open.

The dress, which seemed to exist only to be torn, drifted away into the water once its role was over.

The woman's true form appeared in the moonlight.

Bathed in the brilliant, dripping silver light, her skin remained wet like a statue risen from molten mercury as she reached her arms out to Tenchi.

Even her hair, which was supposed to be chestnut, shone as if it were jet-black and soaked; Tenchi doubted his eyes for a moment.

It’s not Primrose.

The Moon... no, the Moon Goddess...?

"Tenchi..."

A voice like a sigh escaped the woman's lips.

For a moment, from far beyond the high tide of sensuality that was sweeping him away, he felt a presence struggling to rise.

I know this woman.

I should have known.

Because back then, on Ryo-Ohki...

G’bye, Tenchi.

A faint voice mixed with noise, flashing like a warning in another region of his mind, completely devoid of reality.

Ryoko? Why am I thinking of Ryoko?

In that instant, Tenchi was pulled in by supple arms, embraced, and his lips were sealed.

Water, barely different from body temperature, drew Tenchi in and enveloped his entire being.

In the water, the woman's hair spread out like a halo, swaying gently.

Her fingers slid down Tenchi's side.

The thing that had been struggling desperately to rise was swallowed by the high tide without a fight, sinking to the bottom of the waves and disappearing from sight.

Tenchi thought no more.

How he could breathe underwater, who this woman he was holding was.

Everything vanished into the thrill, into the intoxication.

Time condensed and then shattered all at once.

You are mine now.

A woman's voice, overflowing with unmistakable joy, pierced the darkness and echoed through.

You shall live for eternity with me.

Nothing reached Tenchi's ears.

His body and soul were severed from the home where his physical form had been nurtured; held to the breast of the Queen of the Night, he was carried away across the dimensional wall.

At this moment, Tenchi ceased to exist anywhere in the familiar universe of his bloodline.

His very existence may have jumped to another space-time.

It was the complete victory of the nameless one who rules over all the darkness that comes into being across dimensions—the one called Tsukuyomi or the Queen of the Night in this space-time, and called Alha or Omega in others.

"Myannnnn!!"

Ryo-Ohki, who had been following Tenchi's tracks—more precisely, the faint residue of energy spilled from the Palace of Night—let out a crazed cry.

GONE...

RYOKO, TENCHI IS GONE!

Ryoko, who was linked with Ryo-Ohki's consciousness on the bridge while being torn apart by regret, didn't understand what had happened for a moment.

"What!?"

She asked back out loud, rather than through the astral link.

TENCHI IS GONE!

HE'S DISAPPEARED!

Ryo-Ohki repeated patiently.

The words—no, the sensation—that Tenchi had vanished, that he was gone, soaked into Ryoko's mind like water.

"What do you mean, gone? You don't mean he's dead, do you!?"

Ryoko shouted at the crystal, truly horrified by her own words.

No.

No, no, no...

Like when it was Kagato...

Then she finally remembered Ryo-Ohki's first report.

Tenchi had been snatched.

"By who!?" Ryoko shouted, ignoring any context.

THE QUEEN OF THE NIGHT.

THAT'S WHAT SHE SAID.

THE QUEEN'S PALACE FELT VERY STRANGE.

"Ryo-Ohki!" Ryoko felt like she was going to explode with frustration. "Who is that!?"

Immediately, Ryo-Ohki linked with a rush of information like high-speed language fast-forwarded.

She didn't know who it was, Ryo-Ohki said.

The Queen of the Night's ship—the palace—was like another dimension different from normal space, and its true form might be in another dimension altogether, Ryo-Ohki explained.

The ship was like a tentacle thrust into this galaxy; perhaps it extended countless such tentacles into other dimensions as well, and the Queen traveled freely back and forth through its main body.

The Queen herself was not a biological creature, but a kind of high-energy entity, a collective of information energy that gained energy through the exchange of information.

"And then?"

Ryoko narrowed her eyes.

Ryo-Ohki's guess was probably close to the mark.

But that didn't mean she understood it.

She's probably been looking for an opportunity for a long time, Ryoko thought.

The moment Tenchi would be isolated and helpless.

"Where is Tenchi?"

I DON'T KNOW.

The reply came back, no more and no less.

THERE IS NOTHING RYO-OHKI CAN DO.

"I know that!" Ryoko muttered irritably.

It's my fault, she thought.

If she hadn't thrown Tenchi out, he wouldn't have been kidnapped.

Ryoko gritted her teeth.

You've made me angry.

I don't know who you are, the one who snatched Tenchi.

But I'll chase you to the ends of hell.

Whether you're a living thing or not, if you take the form of a woman, I'll make you regret snatching him on my honor as a woman.

Ryoko's hair stood on end with rage.

Not yet.

First, she had to go to where that person was.

Ryoko lowered her voice, trying to control her anger.

"Confirm the shuttle's position. We're going to see Washu."

Ryo-Ohki didn't waste time with idle chatter.

3D coordinates flashed in Ryoko's mind.

"Sub-space jump."

"Myan!"

Ryo-Ohki's hull, having regained the power of her space pirate days, glowed for an instant and then vanished.

"Hey, hey, wouldn't this be better?"

Mihoshi, back in her old nest, asked in a relaxed voice.

"Hmm... not quite," Kiyone shook her head, watching with her arms crossed.

"Don't bother with that, just cut it all off!"

Ayeka shouted, her sleeves tied back with a cord and scissors in one hand.

"Or maybe just shave it bald. Might be nice and refreshing. Don't you think, George?"

"I do not believe it is my place to offer an opinion. After all, I have no hair myself, so I do not have such struggles," came the calm voices of Washu and the part-timer robot, George.

"Don't say whatever you want! I'm not your toy. Let go! Don't touch me!"

The shout of a man bound to a chair for dangerous criminals, unable to move, echoed through the bridge.

Seiran was in a pitiful state.

His sand-colored hair was pinned up all over, and Mihoshi's clumsy hands had braided one side.

"Wait, could someone hold this here for me?"

Holding the end of the braid, a lost Mihoshi looked around at the grinning onlookers.

"This hair is so silky. If it comes undone, it'll take another thirty minutes to re-braid it."

Kiyone couldn't help but burst out laughing.

"There are plenty of pins right there, just use those."

"There's too much of it for pins to hold," Mihoshi protested, her eyes already starting to well up.

"If I gather this braid and this braid and tie them in the back with a ribbon or something, it won't be in the way anymore, right? And I'm working so hard on it!"

"That's why I've been saying from the start we should just cut it! A crew cut is best for a man!"

Ayeka snapped her scissors like a fiddler crab.

It was obvious enough whose hair she was thinking of.

As usual, it had all started with Ayeka's temper.

Every time Seiran said a word, he would push his hair back, and as she watched, the content of his words stopped entering her head entirely.

According to Yukinojo's records, it went something like this:

"It's a good ship. Not your typical government-issue."

(Flap. Swoosh.)

"I hear it's Mihoshi-san's personal ship."

"You have your own ship too, don't you? The Juraian Royal Family's Invincible Fleet is famous."

(Flap.)

"My ship is on Earth. It's being repaired now."

(That hair is so annoying.)

"But it's no match for Ryo-Ohki. That was a real pirate ship—maneuverable and powerful."

(Flap. Swoosh.)

"My ship has perfect defensive power! What exactly are you trying to say?"

"Why do you get angry so easily?"

(Flap.)

"I'm not exactly badmouthing you. Just as you think about Tenchi, I was just thinking about Ryoko. Why the greatest female space pirate in the universe is dealing with a princess like you."

(Here Seiran pushed his hair back again, but the moment he let go, it went back to how it was.)

"Ryoko this, Ryoko that! I don't care about Ryoko! Stop talking about that vulgar woman!"

"Are you perfect? That's nice for you. Do whatever you like. *(Flap.)* but stop badmouthing Ryoko. Just as you love the prince, I love Ryoko."

"You! (Ayeka stood up) Everything you say is about that! I said she was vulgar because she *is* vulgar. And stop pushing your hair back, will you?"

"My hair? What are you talking about?"

(Seiran stopped his hand.)

"It's irritating just to look at! Not just your hair, even your personality is annoying!"

"This hair is my trademark. If I changed it, Ryoko would cry. Stop making groundless accusations!"

"It's not a groundless accusation! Someone, don't you have scissors?"

(Seeing this, Mihoshi came flying over.)

"Ayeka-san, no. It's my fault. I'll take care of it."

"Something like this, we should just cut it off!"

"Now, now, you two, separate, separate."

(This was Kiyone.)

"You're noisy. Just when I thought Ryoko was gone, it's you lot?"

(Washu finally stuck her nose in.)

"Never mind that, just sit here. Oh?"

(The restraint function was switched on. Whether it was intentional is unknown.)

"Oh, Kiyone-san, thank you."

(Ayeka found some scissors.)

"What's this!? Let me go! This is a violation of human rights!"

Because Yukinojo was fed up and withdrew, the record ends here.

"Fine, I lose!"

Seiran shook his head and pushed Mihoshi's hand away.

"If you hate my hair that much, I'll do something about it. Just let me out of this chair."

"Eh? Ohhh, I was almost finished!"

Mihoshi looked down regretfully at the half-undone braid.

It was at that moment.

BOOM!!

A shockwave shook the entire shuttle.

"A high-output object warped out at close range! Part of the defensive shield is damaged!"

Yukinojo cried out.

In an instant, Kiyone's face returned to that of a first-class detective.

"What? A pirate ship!?"

The screen flickered back to life.

"Ah!?"

"Ryo-Ohki!?"

The next moment, a familiar silhouette appeared on the bridge.

"Ryoko!?"

"Ryoko-san!?"

"Yo. It's been a while."

Ryoko, with a grim expression, scanned the bridge for Washu's face.

And then...

"Seiran!? What the hell are you doing!?"

"....."

The expression "the room froze" was surely invented long ago for just such a situation.

"Bwahahahaha!"

A fit of laughter that could only be described as a seizure hit Ryoko.

"What's with that hair? Since when did you have that kind of hobby?"

Seiran looked down at Ryoko, who was writhing in a fit of laughter, with hollow eyes.

"...That guy, how did he survive this hell?"

Seiran recalled Tenchi's face and muttered sullenly.

"He might be a deeper person than I thought."

The ones who sympathized from the bottom of their hearts with those words were Azaka and Kamidake, who hadn't had a chance to appear for a long time.

Chapter Thirteen:
Someday, I’m going to...

"Someday, I'm going to throw all of you into a black hole together," Seiran muttered. Having finally been released from the high-security restraint chair, he was now busy smoothing back his hair, which had also finally been liberated.

"Man, what a shame. I heard you were about to be bullied to death by Ayeka," Ryoko teased.

"Ryoko! How can you say that!?" Seiran looked down at her with a wounded expression, but his face quickly softened into a smile. "But it's fine. You came back to me. I believed you would."

Seiran wrapped his arms around Ryoko and pulled her into a firm embrace. The look on his face, with eyes downcast, was gentler than anything Ayeka had ever seen.

"Hey..." Ryoko started to speak harshly but swallowed the words halfway. The strength had left her. Being in Seiran's arms, the anxiety that had been churning in her heart like jagged waves suddenly calmed into a dead gale. If she closed her eyes, she felt like she’d curl up and relax like a cat.

Ryoko stayed still in his arms with her eyes wide open—though in reality, it was only for about five seconds. Then, she twisted her body and shook him off.

"You really are a hopeless idiot. You think I’d abandon Tenchi and come back just for you?" Her tone was less energetic than usual. "Here, take this."

Ryoko reached into her pocket and pulled out a white handkerchief that looked like a tattered rag. She watched silently as Seiran tied it back around his forehead.

"A red bandana suited you better. The white makes you look like an injured man or a fresh corpse."

"I don't mind," Seiran said, adjusting the knot with affection. "If it's from you, I'd be happy even if it were a floor rag or a bandage."

"I came to see Washu," Ryoko said, turning away abruptly. Ignoring Ayeka, who was standing by silently, she crossed the bridge and stood before Washu.

Washu remained with her arms crossed as usual, waiting for Ryoko to speak. Ryoko felt a sudden surge of discomfort. She wasn't used to asking people for favors. Instead of asking, she usually used her fists; that had served her for almost everything until now.

Washu didn't rush her. She watched Ryoko calmly, waiting as the irritation inside the pirate threatened to boil over. Finally, Ryoko averted her eyes.

"Washu..."

"Say it clearly."

Ryoko flinched instinctively, then felt a sudden flash of anger at herself for having that reaction.

"I want to find him," Ryoko said bluntly. She could feel Ayeka listening intently behind her. Her back felt prickly.

Washu asked back patiently, "Find who?"

"Tenchi!"

Ryoko heard Ayeka gasp.

"And why are you going to look for him?"

This time, Ryoko felt the blood rush to her head. "What!?" By habit, she grabbed Washu by the collar.

Washu didn't even uncross her arms. "Tenchi-dono might have gone of his own will. Ryoko, has that thought never crossed your mind?"

"No way!" Then, Ryoko realized a late fact. "Washu, you brat—you knew!?"

"How would I know?" Washu asked back quite coolly. "You're the one who threw him out, aren't you? What do you want me to do about it?"

"That's why I called Ryo-Ohki to—"

"So you tried to send him back like a piece of luggage. And that luggage went missing. I'm not particularly surprised, even if the luggage decided to walk away on its own two feet. Or perhaps he slipped into another dimension."

Ryoko let go of her, staring back into Washu's sharp eyes, unable to find a comeback.

"You regret it, don't you, Ryoko?" Washu's expression softened. "I can guess what you said when you abducted him. So, what do you want me to do?"

Since Ryoko looked like she was choking on her words, Washu had to add: "I *am* your mother, after all. Just say it. I'm not above listening to my daughter's troubles."

Ayeka, who had been listening with bated breath, finally reached her breaking point. "What on earth is going on!? What happened to Lord Tenchi!?"

Ayeka hadn't really followed Washu's reasoning, but she screamed with a terrifying feminine intuition: "Lord Tenchi was kidnapped, wasn't he!?"

Washu sighed and looked at Ayeka. "Ayeka-dono, I didn't say that. You two really are 'clones' of each other. Only Tenchi-dono knows if he was kidnapped or if he left. And if it was his choice, no one has the right to stop him."

"That's impossible!" Ayeka screamed hysterically. "Lord Tenchi would never leave me behind! Besides, he should be arriving at Jurai by now! He went to get the Water of Life for my Ryu-Oh—he is not the kind of man to abandon a promise halfway!"

"It was just an errand," Washu pointed out. "Think about how it started. A child out on his own might have wanted to take a detour. Maybe he found something interesting. Or maybe he was snatched by a kidnapper."

"A kidnapper!?"

"Abduction!?"

Mihoshi and Kiyone shouted almost simultaneously.

"Oh dear, what should we do!?"

"Even the Galaxy Police are helpless against a kidnapper with the power to hop dimensions."

"Washu-san, what should we do!?"

Mihoshi and Kiyone harmonized like Ayeka's guardians, causing Washu to sigh.

"Listen... why do you ask me everything? Let me guess, you want me to tell you where he is?"

"Yes, yes!" Mihoshi nodded eagerly.

"You want me to make a tracking device?"

"Yes!" Kiyone leaned in.

"You want me to remodel this shuttle?"

"Ooooh..." Mihoshi hesitated slightly.

"You want me to jump through dimensions and go find him?"

"Yes, exactly that!" Ayeka smiled, her worried brow clearing. "That is exactly what I wanted to say!"

"And maybe fold up the universe and put it in my pocket?"

Washu continued regardless, causing Ayeka's brow to furrow again. "Do you all think I can do anything? That the shuttle, Tenchi-dono, and everyone else is just sitting in Washu-chan's pocket?"

Everyone except Seiran and George nodded fervently, leading Washu to her second sigh of the day.

"Well, I suppose it's only natural you'd think so. After all, I am the greatest genius in the universe." Washu gave a pleasant smile, like a magician before an audience. "Unfortunately, I am also the greatest scientist in the universe. I have no intention of searching for Tenchi-dono or bringing him back if it means upsetting the delicate balance of this universe."

"Ehhhh!?" The audience groaned in unison.

"Washu-san, does that mean you can't do anything?" Mihoshi's eyes began to water.

"Why!?" Ayeka pressed her, eyebrows raised in anger. "You're always building suspicious machines without a care for the universe's convenience!"

"That's not it, Ayeka-dono. Whether Tenchi-dono encountered a kidnapper, a peerless beauty, or an extra-dimensional monster, I have no intention of interfering." Washu replied firmly. "Tenchi-dono must resolve his own problems. He chose this. I don't even know the extent of his power, but we shouldn't be coddling him together."

For a moment, Ayeka was lost for words. She looked around for help and saw her guardians standing patiently.

"No, I will not allow it!" Ayeka shouted with a voice that surprised even herself. "Lord Tenchi is the legitimate successor to our Royal Family of Jurai. I cannot overlook a known danger!"

"Then by all means," Washu countered spitefully. "Go ahead and dispatch the Jurain royal Invincible Fleet."

"Washu-san!!" Tears welled up from sheer anger. No matter how much she shouted, she was helpless without Washu's power. Ayeka's shoulders trembled, but she held her ground through pride alone. "If you're going to say that much, I trust you'll take responsibility!? If anything happens to Lord Tenchi, Jurai will pursue your irresponsible words and actions with its full might!"

"Stop it, Princess!" Seiran's voice cut in. "Is he a man who can't take care of himself? The Prince has the Master Key, doesn't he? Do you not believe in him? Stop saying such unsightly things."

Ayeka turned sharply. "Be quiet! Didn't you say you didn't care about Lord Tenchi anyway?"

"That's right." Seiran shrugged. "It doesn't matter to me where he goes or what he does. I'd be thrilled if the obstacle were gone, but it seems the Goddess of Love hates me thoroughly. Why did you come back, Ryoko?"

Seiran's voice turned bitter. "I don't know what happened between you and the Prince. I don't want to know. You probably had a hard time; I can see it in your face. Stop chasing him. If that boy really has the power to cross dimensions, he should be able to return. Right, Washu-san?"

"That's right," Washu nodded.

"Let's stick to the facts. You say the Prince is not in this dimension?"

"If Ryo-Ohki can't detect him, that's what it means."

"Why?"

"It's a long explanation," Washu said, then added after seeing Seiran's face, "You were involved with Ryoko, weren't you? Ryo-Ohki isn't just a pirate ship. She and Ryoko are a single organism that complements each other. The astral link is a high-level means of communication, using a dimension one step above normal space. That's why they can detect a target without being bound by the causality of space-time. But that's only within the time-laws of *this* universe. So, if they can't detect him, he's in another universe or another time-law."

"I don't understand!" Ayeka screamed. "What are you saying? Lord Tenchi is just gone? Who on earth has the power to do such a thing!?"

"The Queen of the Night..." Ryoko muttered.

"What?" Ayeka asked.

"The Queen of the Night." Seiran turned around.

"The Queen of the Night??" Mihoshi and Kiyone looked at each other.

"Seiran, you must know. Who is she? Where is she?"

"Ryoko!?" Seiran cut his words off painfully as Ryoko pressed him. "You're asking me? Yes, I met her—a mysterious woman who didn't seem to belong to this world. I reached her ship after following Ryo-Ohki with the Prince on board. I don't know who she is. And even if I did, I wouldn't want to say."

"What kind of woman is she?" Ryoko's eyes flashed gold. "I'm going to find her. I'll take Tenchi back, no matter where she is."

"Ryoko-san!?" Ayeka finally realized she had been left out of the loop. "What is the meaning of this!? You knew! Lord Tenchi was kidnapped by that woman, the Queen of the Night? Washu-san knew too? And you!" Ayeka pointed a finger at Seiran. "How cruel... all of you are trying to take Lord Tenchi away from me. You think it's fine for me to wait around knowing nothing. You're planning to steal him in the meantime! Even though Lord Tenchi is my... Jurai's legitimate fiancé!"

"Can't you say anything without hiding behind the Juraian name!?" Seeing the tears fall from Ayeka's eyes, Ryoko felt a surge of anger and wanted to hit her. "Listen, someone like me... I was rejected outright by Tenchi! I was going to give up. I thought, 'Enough, I'll send him back to his grandpa and dad.' I was going to call Ryo-Ohki and send him home. And then some unknown woman snatched him away!"

Ryoko pointed her fist at Ayeka as if she were that woman. "I won't forgive it. Having another woman by Tenchi's side. If Tenchi followed her, he's definitely being tricked. I'm going to fight, Ayeka. I only didn't tell you because I didn't want to involve you."

"Liar!" Ayeka shouted back through her tears. "You have someone like Seiran! It's too selfish of you to want Lord Tenchi all to yourself on top of that. Give me back my Tenchi! Give him back!"

"Shut up! You can't do anything but scream. Try doing something with your own power for once! If you're so proud of Jurai, use Jurai's power to find him!"

"If I could, I would have done it long ago!"

Ryoko flinched for a moment at the sheer intensity.

"You have no idea how much I envied you, how much I wished I had power like yours! Every time I saw you shamelessly hugging him or peeking at him, I blamed myself until I was sick. I wondered if he liked Ryoko better, if he'd be happier if I were bolder. But I can't! All I can do is try to keep my body and soul pure. I thought if I did that, he would eventually look my way and notice me. That a miracle of love would come..."

Riiiiiing...

The talisman on Ayeka's left arm resonated. The sound, like a bell or a signal, grew louder and softer, ringing continuously. Seiran felt like he heard the mocking voice of a goddess of love or fate. Yes... the goddess was playing a cruel game. A game of love and death like Russian roulette, where no one knew who would survive.

Ayeka looked down at the talisman. *That's right. I had forgotten about this...* The words of the priest when he gave it to her came back vividly, along with his expression.

> *That is a talisman to call forth a miracle of love. You must never use it alone.*

Ayeka's expression changed. A smile appeared on her tear-stained cheeks, and her eyes looked past Ryoko toward the memory of the missing Tenchi. "I am coming now," Ayeka whispered softly.

She finally looked back at Ryoko as if noticing her.

"Ayeka-dono, don't use it! That's not from this universe!" Washu sensed something was wrong. The space around Ayeka wavered as if it were being cut out, threatening to vanish with her.

"Ayeka!?"

"Princess Ayeka, no!!"

The guardians and Ryoko shouted at once and tried to rush forward.

"Goodbye, Ryoko. I am going to Lord Tenchi. Talisman, take me to him!"

The guardians were repelled by the distorted space and fell into functional stasis. In that instant, Ayeka vanished. The talisman—a ring-shaped marker—fell to the bridge floor, spinning for a while.

"Who gave this to Ayeka-dono?"

"Washu-san!?" Mihoshi's eyes went wide as Washu picked up the talisman as if it were nothing.

"Kiyone-dono, do you know?"

Kiyone shook her head blankly. She couldn't believe what had just happened before her eyes.

"Mihoshi... doesn't know, either." Seeing Mihoshi shaking her head vigorously, Washu turned her gaze to Seiran. "If you don't know, no one does."

"I know the priest of the Halo Sect was talking to her before we moved to this shuttle," Seiran answered slowly. The game had already begun. He had to see it through to the end. "I didn't think to stop and listen, so even if it was given to her then, I didn't see it."

Washu sighed. It was her third sigh of the day. "We're cursed."

Seeing Kiyone’s stunned face, Washu corrected herself. "Is it strange for a scientist to say we're cursed? Perhaps I should say we're being interfered with by unidentified information. But Kiyone-dono, you saw that, didn't you? Something happened that's a bit hard to explain in words. Unfortunately, Ayeka-dono stepped into it of her own accord."

"What does that mean?"

"Where did Ayeka-san go?"

Mihoshi and Kiyone asked at the same time.

"Are you two bilingual?" Washu snapped back with her usual impatience, but she did answer the question. "Kiyo-chan, the situation isn't simple enough to explain in one word, but basically, this happened because another powerful entity interfered. Miho-chan, that depends on how the information was transmitted. I think that talisman is like a marker for picking up information, but it likely has a filter that suits the person who made it. There's a danger of information being lost or becoming excessive. Understand?"

"What's with 'Kiyo-chan'!?"

"Ehhh, am I 'Miho-chan'?"

"A perfect example of missing information—no, of a short circuit," Washu muttered to herself.

"Washu-san, why do you know everything?"

"If a magician explains the trick, the magic fades, doesn't it? That's my magic. I'm sorry, but I can't tell you."

"Uuuu..." Mihoshi clutched her head. "Am I an idiot? I don't understand a thing Washu-san is saying."

"To you, it wouldn't matter even if it weren't Washu-san."

"That's not true! I understand what Kiyone says perfectly. You're making fun of me, aren't you?"

"Ding-dong! ...Wait, does that mean I'm on the same level as you?"

"Bingo. What a cold reality," Washu said.

"How can you two do a comedy routine at a time like this?" Seiran looked between them in disbelief. "By the way, where's Ryoko? Hey, Ryoko!?"

"She's with Ryo-Ohki. Don't worry, you don't have to look like your heart is going to stop. She'll be back soon anyway."

Washu examined the talisman. She could read fading ancient characters on the surface.

Love is the light that illuminates the darkness.

Darkness is the eternal truth.

O light born from the darkness,

Meet here and become one.

It was a spell of union that felt like a curse, different from the Halo Sect's usual teachings.

"Well, now, what should we do?" Washu muttered. "For now, I'll keep this. Tell me when Ryoko gets back." Washu left the bridge quickly before anyone could stop her.

Mihoshi and Kiyone looked at each other and then toward Seiran, who had also been left behind.

"What now, Kiyone?"

"What do you mean, 'what now'..." Seiran shook his head. "Stop asking me!"

All three sighed together.

"I wonder where Ayeka-san went," Mihoshi whispered, her confusion not cleared at all.

"To Tenchi's side, obviously," Kiyone answered, having lost the will to think.

"And where is Tenchi?"

"With the Queen of the Night."

"What kind of person is the Queen of the Night?"

"The woman in Mozart's opera, the one with the furious coloratura soprano."

Mihoshi blinked. "Why would she need to seduce Tenchi?"

"Seduce? You mean kidnap, right?"

"Oh, right. But don't you think seduction seems more likely?" Mihoshi's intuition occasionally hit upon the truth like this.

"Yeah. So, assuming she seduced and kidnapped him, what's the goal?"

"When a woman kidnaps a man in the Masaki household, there's only one goal." The two detectives clapped their hands together. "To make him hers!"

"Hey, hey..." Seiran couldn't help but interject in disbelief. "Are you two really detectives?"

"I sometimes doubt it with her, but as for me, definitely," Kiyone said proudly. "Now then, Mr. Pirate. How about you cooperate with our questioning?"

At that moment, the elegant sound of an orchestra began to play.

"Ah, this is it! This is that opera. Thanks, Yukinojo."

"You're very welcome. Now that my master has returned, I have nothing to do and I'm bored and idle and perfectly happy."

Kiyone ignored Yukinojo's sarcasm and pointed at the restraint chair. "I won't turn on the switch, so sit down and relax."

Seiran sighed and sat down reluctantly.

"Now then. Where should we start?"

"H-hey, can I say something?" Mihoshi raised her hand like a schoolgirl. "I'm hungry!"

"Daaaah!" Kiyone face-planted onto the console. "You...!"

"But since Sasami-chan isn't here, it's been nothing but retort pouches all day."

"Excuse me, if it's alright with you, shall I prepare something?" A man's voice suddenly came from the wall, making the two detectives jump.

"George-san!!"

"Gah, you scared me! Were you there the whole time?"

"I apologize for startling you. My former master always said a servant should normally be like a golf club on the wall." George bowed politely. "In other words, not meddling, but always ready to be picked up and used to hit a thief when needed."

"I see..."

"Then please give me about thirty minutes." George left the bridge.

"...Now, where were we?" Kiyone turned back to Seiran, having regained her composure.

"We haven't done anything yet."

"...R-right. First, the appearance of the Queen of the Night."

"Long black hair, a slender face with pale skin, mysterious ruby-red eyes. She's about my height, and her measurements are roughly 90-59-89." Seiran had given up. There was a way to handle detectives.

"Hmm, hmm." Kiyone nodded as she entered the data into the 3D montage system. A 1/5th scale 3D image appeared in the space.

"The dress has a deep heart-cut at the chest... here, let me take over." Seiran and Kiyone switched seats, and the 3D image was rapidly refined. "Like this. If we make it life-size..."

The Queen of the Night, with her mysterious eyes in shadow, was born in the room. Seiran’s montage was quite artistic and accurate.

"This is amazing..."

"It’s no wonder Tenchi fell for her," the two female detectives whispered in admiration.

"But you certainly looked closely, didn't you?" The two women nodded at the same time. "Men are so lecherous!"

"What!?" Seiran backed away from the unprovoked accusation.

At that moment, George entered carrying three-tiered lacquer boxes and soup bowls. "I hope this is to your liking." He distributed the meals with a practiced hand and stepped back.

"It’s a kaiseki bento!" Kiyone's astonished voice rang out, overpowering the opera.

"It looks delicious..." With fingers trembling from emotion, Mihoshi picked up her chopsticks. "It *is* delicious!!"

"Thank you." George gave a modest smile, bowed, and left the bridge.

For a while, a blissful silence fell, created by Mozart and the exquisite food. Even Seiran, who was likely eating kaiseki for the first time, said nothing as he struggled with his chopsticks.

"Oh, I wish Sasami-chan could eat this!" Mihoshi whispered rapturously. "I wonder if a miracle will happen right now, and she'll say 'Big sister, I'm home!'"

Riiiiiiing...

The same sound as when Ayeka vanished occurred. Then, the talisman Washu had taken appeared on Mihoshi's arm.

"Oh...! Are you telling me to use this!?"

Kiyone, who unfortunately had a mouth full of rice, reached out, but it was too late.

"Sasami-chan, come home!"

Instantly, the talisman vanished, and a small figure clutching a white object appeared in the center of the bridge.

"Sasami-chan!?"

"Huh!? Big sister Mihoshi??"

Kiyone dropped her chopsticks, and Seiran froze with a piece of pumpkin skewered on his.

"Sasami, why are you here?"

"A mi-ra-cle happened!" Mihoshi jumped up and hugged Sasami. "Welcome back, Sasami-chan! There's delicious food here!"

"Wait! The talisman just vanished for a second!?" A frantic Washu burst into the bridge still holding her chopsticks and nearly fainted. "Sasami-chan!?"

"Ah, Washu-chan!"

"Welcome back, Princess Sasami." George, who seemed to have been cleaning up, entered while wiping his hands on his apron.

"George!" Sasami ran to George while clutching a mug. "Look, I found it—the pendant."

Sasami pulled a pendant shaped like a subatomic particle model from her pocket.

"That's good. I was worried." George picked up Sasami along with her mug and smiled as if all were right with the world.

Chapter Fourteen:
"Awaken, Prince of Light"

"Awaken, Prince of Light."

A soft voice spoke, like a gentle tickle deep inside his ear. Tenchi opened his eyes slowly, only to shut them again instantly.

He couldn't see. He could see absolutely nothing.

There was a true darkness there, without even a needle-prick of light. He couldn't even see his own hands. All he could feel was a soft warmth wrapped around his back and arms, as if someone were cradling his body.

"Who’s there...!?"

Tenchi knew this touch. He questioned the voice, his mind struggling with the gap between the vivid memories of the Night Palace and the Final Pavilion that were rushing back to him and this blind, crushing void.

"Why can't I see anything? Where is this?"

"You haven't been born yet," the voice answered teasingly. "Try saying your name. Try saying mine. Come now..."

"My name..."

Tenchi was bewildered. He intended to say *Masaki Tenchi*. But as if the words had suddenly caught on the back of his tongue, the name "Masaki Tenchi" shrank within him and vanished.

"I..."

"Since when did you start calling yourself 'I', nameless child?" the voice pressed further.

"..."

Suddenly, the world brightened. At the same moment, a biting cold struck Tenchi’s skin.

It was snowing. The flakes fell upon his young head, his neck, the cold grey tombstone, and his outstretched hands.

It hurts...!!

Tenchi squeezed his small hands tight. Blood seeped from the cracks in his chapped skin. He had struck the tombstone over and over again. He simply couldn't forgive it; he knew the truth, yet couldn't believe it. He had thought that if he could just smash that heavy, cold thing, everything would go back to the way it was... and while lost in that thought, he had ended up here.

Mom!

His voice was choked and raspy—nothing but a tiny whisper.

No, this is no good! Mom won't be able to hear me like this!

Suddenly, his heart gave a sharp prick of pain. *I'm not a little kid anymore. I'm five years old now. I'm a man, so I have to be strong. Grandpa and Dad both said so.*

I... no, I'm a man. Even if I cry or hit things, Mom isn't coming back. And Mom told me to do my training every day.

Suddenly, his mother's gentle voice resurfaced. These were words he had tucked away in the deepest part of his heart for a long, long time, trying never to remember them.

(Tenchi... be a good boy. Become a strong and kind man. Mom will always be by your side. I'll protect you until you grow big and strong...)

"Liar...!"

Tenchi brushed away his tears with his fist. *She said she'd be with me forever. She said we'd go to the sea next summer.*

Words that had gone unsaid for a long, long time—eleven years—tore from Tenchi's throat.

"Mom, you're a liar!!"

The scenery shifted abruptly. Tenchi was now nine years old. On the way home from school, a girl was walking beside him. It was Nami-chan—a transfer student, a cute girl with long hair.

"Tenchi-kun, I heard you don't have a mother?" Nami-chan was saying. "I was so surprised when I heard. You don't look like that at all. You're so cheerful and

energetic... Hey, I'm sorry to ask, but why did she die? Was it an illness or something?"

Again, his heart gave a sharp prick of pain.

"I want to know more about you, Tenchi-kun." Nami-chan blushed slightly. "You're kinder than the other boys. It's so sad that your mom died... I'll be your friend."

Nami-chan's eyes were direct, as if they were peering right into his soul.

"I..."

Tenchi hesitated. He didn't want to be walking alone with a girl like this. He didn't want her asking about his mother when she knew nothing. *I should just say I hate this. I should tell her to stop following me*.

"Tenchi-kun?" Nami-chan tilted her head and peered into his face.

"Shut up!!" The words he had never been able to say burst out of Tenchi's mouth. "It's none of your business! Stop following me!!"

Something snapped deep inside his heart. Tenchi shoved Nami-chan away roughly and started running without looking back. Along with the beating of his heart, something heavy and painful began to swell and rise within him.

Tenchi was now fifteen. He had been in the bookstore for forty minutes; his legs were starting to feel tired. *Should I go to the arcade today, or McDonald's...?* Tenchi thought idly.

By rights, he should have been at his cram school long ago. For the past week, Tenchi had been skipping school and wandering around town. There were friends he could call, and if he wanted to do something more fun, it wasn't impossible.

But in the end, he usually did neither, spending his time looking at magazines or just spacing out in a burger shop to kill time. When it was late enough, he'd leave the shop and go home. He intended to do the same today.

As he left the bookstore, someone tapped Tenchi on the shoulder.

"Dad...!?"

"Are you going to cram school?" his father asked, not sounding accusatory. "I got a call from the teacher. They said you haven't been lately. If you don't want to

go, I don't mind if you stop, but..." His father sighed. "I've been busy too. Sorry, Tenchi."

His heart gave a sharp prick of pain. "It's fine... why are you apologizing, old man?" It would have felt much better if he'd been yelled at. Tenchi started walking away, trying to shake off his irritation.

"Where are you going?" his father called out.

"Cram school!" Tenchi shouted back. "I'm going, so don't worry. You're busy, right?"

"Tenchi!" His father caught up with a light jog. "Forget about today. Want to go grab some dinner?"

Tenchi's feet stopped dead. Seeing his father being strangely considerate made him feel pathetic, and his chest felt sick with resentment.

"I wonder what your mother would have done..." he heard his father mutter. He wasn't saying it specifically for Tenchi to hear; he often talked to himself like that. *If it were Mom, if Mom saw this, if Mom were alive...*

Every time, Tenchi had thought: *Mom would definitely say this, Mom would have done that...*

Yes, it was this moment! Tenchi remembered this instant from a year ago with vivid pain.

Sorry, Dad. He could hear his own voice saying it in his heart. *I'll go to school properly starting tomorrow...*

The "me" from a year later who had answered like that was his current self. Tenchi turned around.

"Mom is dead. I'm not going to high school. I'm quitting the cram school and the training too."

Unexpectedly, harsh and prickly words poured out. Seeing the shocked look on his father's face, Tenchi felt a sense of relief. At the same time, a dark anger surged up from the depths of his heart.

What! It's easy! I didn't have to think about it every single time someone said "If your mom was here..." I'll go to high school, Dad. Not just any school; I'll study like crazy and aim for the best in the prefecture. After that, I'll decide. I'm sure there's a different encounter waiting, a different life.

A different life...

Current memories that he shouldn't have known a year ago suddenly flooded into Tenchi. Ryoko, the demon of the shrine; Ayeka and Sasami of the Jurai Royal Family; Mihoshi and Kiyone of the Galaxy Police; and the mysterious genius scientist, Washu... The faces of the women who had surrounded him in a flash...

"Stay away!!" Tenchi screamed.

The memories were too vivid, too raw; they threatened to crush the "different life" he had just imagined. Before he knew it, his fifteen-year-old self and his father's image had vanished, and the surroundings were sinking back into darkness.

"I can't do anything when you're around!! I can't do anything but stay away from school, plow carrot patches, and spend every day being careful and reserved around you all! Who wants women you can't even touch? You're all just teasing me for your own amusement... I've had enough! Go home! Don't bring your troubles to me!!"

A light suddenly appeared in the darkness. It traced the white silhouette of a naked woman and illuminated Tenchi's own body. From the darkness, a woman's face of indescribable beauty emerged. With deep crimson eyes like rubies holding unfathomable mystery and lips hiding the taste of nectar, she was a different kind of woman from Ryoko or Ayeka... a woman he had met three times, and whose name he finally knew.

"The Queen of the Night..." Tenchi called her name clearly. "What do you want with me?"

"I want you, Tenchi," the Queen of the Night whispered in a voice like dripping honey. "I shall give you a new name and new raiment. You shall be called the Prince of Darkness."

"Prince of Darkness?"

Tenchi frowned and looked down at his body. Instead of his familiar everyday clothes, he was now wearing an outfit of a stature befitting a prince. He looked down at the strangely designed, long-waisted coat. In the center of the chest was gold embroidery—the sign of a halo emitting radial, needle-like light. The

all-black outfit, which seemed to melt into the darkness, felt appropriate for his current self.

He felt himself being served by a woman so beautiful she could only be worshipped in dreams, and a part of his heart felt a deep sense of satisfaction...

"Then I shall also return to an outfit befitting the Prince's partner." The Queen returned to a flowing, simple black dress.

"Beautiful..." Tenchi ran his fingers through the Queen's lustrous black hair and kissed her softly. Feeling that once was not enough, he kissed her again, and then once more, this time on her smooth white throat.

"What should I call you?"

"Whatever you like," the Queen answered with a low laugh. "Call me Tsukuyomi. In the ancient tongue of your land, it is the name of the ruler of the night."

"Tsukuyomi..." Tenchi held the Queen's glowing white face in both hands, and suddenly remembered the woman he had met in the Final Pavilion. "Are you Primrose? Did you trap me? Where have you brought me?"

"Is being by my side not enough to ease your worry?" Tsukuyomi smiled. "This is where time ends. Where all things are born and to which all things return... You may walk into another time, or return to the time you have lived; the flow of time is infinite... You chose me, and so you came here. If you say I trapped you, then perhaps I did."

"Why..." Suddenly feeling anxious, Tenchi let go of her hands. *Am I about to make... a terrible mistake? Am I walking on the edge of a cliff without knowing it, like the Fool card in a tarot deck?*

"Are you afraid, Prince?" Tsukuyomi's eyes took on an eerie light. "Will you run away again, like a child afraid of the dark? The more brilliantly the light shines, the deeper the darkness sinks. You have kept your eyes closed to your own darkness. Love is that which shines deep within the dark. If you lack the courage to step into the darkness, I shall send you back to the world of your birth this instant. But know this: you shall never see me again."

Tenchi caught his breath. The faces of those he had left behind in the familiar world flashed through his mind. Ryoko... Ayeka... Dad... Grandpa... the Masaki house standing faded like an image from the distant past...

"What should I do?" Tenchi looked back into the woman’s eyes challengingly.

Goodbye, Masaki household. Goodbye, Mom... I am betraying the world I've lived in until now, the promise I intended to keep. I don't know what lies ahead, but...

"Open your heart to your own darkness and accept it. When that which sleeps within you is unleashed, your power will change the world."

The memory of Ryoko's sad face when they parted flashed through Tenchi's mind.

"Even though you left me behind...!"

Tenchi squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head to drive away Ryoko's face. Behind his closed eyelids, his vision was stained with darkness. Words he couldn't say, hands he had held back, feelings he had given up on... those ghosts overflowed into Tenchi's heart and burned fiercely.

When Tenchi opened his eyes again, the flames that had been scorching the darkness were gone. Before him stretched a black sea of stars.

"It's dark."

Tenchi slowly raised his hand. A magnificent palace appeared in the void. Built of dark crystal, the palace was befitting a nocturnal court, reflecting and shining with the light of tens of thousands of stars.

"This was... my power."

Tenchi stared at the grand palace for a long time. Even without speaking, he could feel a terrifying power surging within him. He felt as though he could destroy this massive palace with a single strike now. He could extinguish the light of the stars and block the march of time. If he so wished... if only he willed it.

"Prince of Darkness..." Tenchi whispered.

The sound settled comfortably into his body, bringing back the shivering pleasure he had felt when he first met the Queen. A smile appeared on his lips, casting a deep shadow across his cheek. Tenchi turned and savored the beautiful face of the woman who was now his.

"I’ve been wondering all this time... just who was this 'Prince of Light' supposed to be anyway?"

Tenchi took Tsukuyomi—the Queen of the Night—by the arm, and they slowly climbed the steps of the palace and disappeared.

"Hey, hey, where's Big Sister? Where's Big Brother Tenchi?"

Sasami, who had been returned to the shuttle by the miracle of the talisman, was eating the kaiseki bento George had made while clutching a fluffy Mug. But as time passed and neither her sister nor Tenchi appeared, she began to grow suspicious.

"Uhh... you see..." Mihoshi and Kiyone looked at each other and then instinctively looked toward Washu for help.

"Since Ryo-Ohki is here, that means Big Sister Ryoko and Big Brother Tenchi are back too, right? I've finished eating, so can I go over to Ryo-Ohki? Is Big Sister over there too?"

"Sasami-chan, come here for a moment." Washu had been fiddling with the talisman with a thoughtful look, but she motioned for the girl to come closer as if giving up. "Who did this unnecessary thing? At least this child was being kept away from all the trouble." Washu glared at Mihoshi, who hung her head in shame.

"Sasami-chan, the truth is..."

Just as Washu was about to explain everything in a tone that was uncharacteristically hesitant, a voice interrupted.

"High-output object energy wave detected! Warping out!" Yukinojo shouted.

"Again!?"

"Who is it this time?"

Just as Mihoshi and Kiyone stood up, a flash of noise ran across the screen, and a large cruiser like they'd never seen appeared.

"It's me, me! Who was it that snatched Sasami-chan away? Honestly, you gave me quite a shock. Snatched her back without a word... you guys are no ordinary group."

The screen switched, and a dazzling blonde woman appeared.

"A-Ah, you're..."

"I'm Blondie. I'm coming over now."

As the woman's image vanished from the screen, the real Blondie appeared in front of Mihoshi and Kiyone.

"Hieeee!?" Mihoshi and Kiyone hugged each other in surprise, while Sasami's face lit up as she ran over.

"Big sister!"

"Oh, Sasami-chan!"

Sasami and Blondie held hands and rejoiced like children, while Mug hopped around happily at their feet.

"Sorry I brought Mug with me."

"It's fine, it's fine! I'd give Sasami-chan anything." Blondie picked up Mug again and tucked the creature into Sasami's arms. "By the way, what happened to that noisy older sister and the others?"

"Well, you see..." Sasami looked back at Washu, troubled. "Everyone's acting a bit strange! It seems like a lot of weird things have been happening while I wasn't looking. Hey, where's Big Sister? Where's Big Brother Tenchi? Where's Ryoko?"

Sasami bit her lip and hugged Mug tight. "Hey, Washu-chan, let's just go home. I don't like this. Everyone has so many secrets and everything is falling apart, and no one will play with me, and Big Brother Tenchi isn't coming... I'm lonely. It was much better when I was making dinner at home..."

Large tears began to fall from Sasami's eyes.

"Why are you making such a little girl cry?" Blondie put an arm around Sasami and hugged her comfortingly. "Does no one love this child? I really will take her for myself. Just what on earth happened? Well, maybe a kidnapper shouldn't be the one saying that." Blondie's eyes flashed with anger as she looked around at each person on the bridge.

"I'll tell you."

Seiran, who had been leaning against the wall watching, stepped forward. "So you're Princess Ayeka's younger sister. Your sister chased the Prince of Light and went to the Night Palace. You're still a child so you might not understand, but she should be meeting the Queen of the Night right about now. I don't know if

she'll win or lose, but once it's settled, she'll surely come back. You've caused your sister worry too, so be a good girl and be patient."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Sasami set Mug down, wiped her tears, and looked up defiantly. "I'm not that much of a child! Mister pirate, tell me properly."

"Mister!?" Seiran nearly tripped. "I'm Ryoko's lover. At least call me 'big brother'. But Princess Sasami, everything I just said is true. This is likely... a profound game. Understand?" Seiran put a hand on Sasami's shoulder, knelt down, and looked her straight in the face.

"I'll talk to you as an adult. Your beloved Big Brother Tenchi was taken by a mysterious woman calling herself the Queen of the Night. I don't know what she's planning, but when I saw her, the Queen was seducing the Prince. The Prince is missing, having been separated from Ryoko. That genius scientist over there says the Prince is no longer in this universe. Your sister used the miracle of the talisman to follow him. And then these first-class detectives here wished for a second miracle, which is why you came back."

"The talisman...?" Sasami forgot to wipe her tears and looked around. "You mean the Miracle Talisman!?"

Blondie raised her hand. The talisman vanished from Washu's hand and appeared in Blondie's palm. "It's been two thousand five hundred years. I heard she gave it to someone, but so this is where it was." Blondie held the talisman up to the light, and the Halo Sect spell appeared.

"Love is the light that illuminates the darkness. Darkness is the eternal truth—it's a Binding Gate." Blondie tossed it toward Washu. "You shouldn't use that. Mama loves to sip on human souls. You never know what kind of miracle will happen. It's a terrifying thing when the wish in the depths of your heart comes true. You were lucky." Blondie nodded toward Mihoshi.

"Mama!?" Seiran was speechless. "Your mother isn't...?"

"Oh, didn't I say? I'm the daughter of the Queen of the Night. That talisman was the one that was on Mama's arm." Blondie gave an enchanting smile. "You're Seiran, right? Looking closely, you're quite a handsome man. Why don't you come to my ship and play with me?" Blondie put a light hand on Sasami's head while looking at Seiran with a gaze that might have made a minor faint.

"Don't go touching another person's man, Blondie the Succubus!"

Suddenly, light-blue hair cut between the two.

"Ryoko!" Seiran backed away in surprise.

"I know the rumors about you. They say you've been living for millions of years by sucking the life force out of men. Your face changes all the time, but that blonde hair stays the same, doesn't it? That's why you're Blondie. I've seen plenty of men who've become hollow shells after falling for you. You're a sinful woman." Ryoko glared at Blondie with golden eyes. "But well, none of that matters. If you're really the daughter of the Queen of the Night, you know where she is, right? Tell me and I might just forgive you."

Ryoko drew her aura blade. "Don't think you or your 'Mama' can just put your hands on my man and get away with it. Let's settle this right now!"

"Stop it." Blondie pushed the aura blade aside. "Eavesdropping is in poor taste, Ryoko-chan the Space Pirate. Millions of years is a bit of an exaggeration, isn't it? I was born just twenty thousand years ago or so. I'm the same age as that genius girl over there. Although we haven't met directly, you've certainly learned about love, unlike when you were being raised by that blockhead Kagato."

"Shut up!" Ryoko swung her aura blade, and Blondie twisted slightly to dodge the tip. "Stop with the chatter and tell me already! I'm serious. I'll get Tenchi back even if it’s the last thing I do. Where is the Queen?"

"Mmm-hmm..." Blondie licked her lips happily. "This is exciting. If you're that serious, maybe a miracle of love really will happen. Use the talisman. You'll be able to go straight to Mama." Blondie glanced toward Washu.

Without answering, Ryoko teleported in front of Washu and held out her hand. "Lend me the talisman."

"You'd take it even if I said no, wouldn't you?" Washu sighed and dropped the talisman into Ryoko's palm. "Ryoko. Listen well..." Washu beckoned Ryoko closer and reached out to stroke her light-blue hair. "Fighting isn't the only kind of justice... though I suppose you wouldn't understand that now. Not when you've already been taken in by the information. Be careful, Ryoko. The information you choose might corner you. If you think of someone as an enemy, you'll have no choice but to defeat them."

"So what!?" Ryoko roughly interrupted Washu. "This is what I believe in. This is the only thing supporting me." Ryoko squeezed the talisman in her fist. "I'll

make a miracle happen with this hand." Ryoko's eyes burned gold. "Talisman! Take me to Tenchi!!"

Riiiiiing...

The talisman resonated with a bell-like sound. Ryoko's form began to waver.

"I'm coming, Tenchi..." An ecstatic smile appeared on her face.

Suddenly, a man's hand grabbed Ryoko's wrist.

"I'm going too."

"Seiran!?" Ryoko tried to pull away, but Seiran wouldn't let go.

"I'll be your shadow. If you're going to fight, I'll fight with you." Seiran put an arm around her back and held her tight, as if to protect her from an invisible enemy. It was finally his turn in the game. Seiran wasn't about to miss this chance.

"Big Sister Ryoko!?"

"That's a different space inside there. You might destruct if you touch it." Blondie held Sasami back as the girl tried to run forward.

"Why didn't that man disappear?" Sasami struggled to break free of Blondie's grip. "Washu-chan! Big Sister Ryoko is going...!"

At that moment, the two vanished, and the talisman fell to the floor.

"Big Sister Ryoko!?"

Blondie let go of Sasami and picked up the spinning talisman. "What a strange guy... most men who meet Mama end up completely spineless."

Sasami stared with wide eyes at the space where Ryoko and Seiran had disappeared. "Why... why is everyone leaving!?"

"If you want, I'll stay by your side forever, Sasami-chan." Blondie put a hand on Sasami's shoulder.

"No!" Sasami reflexively brushed Blondie's hand away and looked around the bridge. "Mug... Mug won't go anywhere, right? Where are you, Mug?"

"He's hiding here, quite frightened." A calm voice spoke, and George crawled out from a corner of the bridge holding Mug. "Princess Sasami, come here. Mug is hungry."

"Ah..." Sasami walked over to George hesitantly and gently stroked Mug's fur. "Can you make food for Mug?"

"Anything with carbohydrates will do. Come to the kitchen." George left the bridge carrying Mug, and Sasami followed him, looking back as she went.

Blondie watched Sasami go in silence, then let out a small sigh. "...I wanted a child too... though saying so won't change anything."

"Haaaah..." Mihoshi and Kiyone exhaled all at once.

"It's just like Sasami-chan said."

"And if everyone’s gone, what are we supposed to do?" Kiyone's shoulders slumped. "Detectives are so powerless. We can't do a single thing."

"That's not true!" Mihoshi stood up straight. "Umm, Blondie-san? Could you lend me the talisman?"

Mihoshi tentatively squeezed the talisman with both hands, looked up at the ceiling, and began to pray. "I hope Tenchi-san and Ayeka-san and Ryoko-san and Seiran-san all come back! Please, make a miracle happen!"

"It's no use," Blondie’s voice interrupted. "It's limited to one per person. If it happened two or three times, it wouldn't be a miracle, would it? Well, I guess I'll head back. It seems the fun is over." Blondie shrugged. "It was nice meeting you. Say hello to Sasami-chan for me."

"Wait a minute, Blondie-san," Kiyone stood in her way. "You don't have to be in such a hurry to leave. I’d like you to explain things so even I can understand. Just what on earth is going on?"

"Is that an invitation? Or a threat?" Blondie turned back, licking her lips with interest.

"I'm requesting your cooperation." Kiyone pointed to the chair with the restraint function. "I'll do things my way. What's the registration number of your cruiser?"

The first-class detective of the Galaxy Police, who didn't believe in miracles, and the daughter of the Queen of the Night stared each other down across the console.

Chapter Fifteen:
"Welcome Home"

"Welcome home."

"Master, Mother, welcome home."

The moment they stepped into the palace of dark crystal he had created, hundreds of joy-filled voices rose in unison. The mysterious power surging through Tenchi's body seethed and boiled; if he didn't consciously restrain it, it felt as though it would explode.

I... what on earth is this power!?

On both sides of the great hall, where the starlight was woven like a tapestry, rows of women clad in deep navy robes stood perfectly still. As Tenchi and Tsukuyomi walked past, they bowed their heads one by one. Among them, Tenchi recognized faces from the Final Pavilion.

"You guys are..." Tenchi paused, looking at the familiar faces while walking beside Tsukuyomi.

"Do you remember? I am Moonshade."

"I am Viola, and I am Violet."

"You are being reborn."

"You are becoming the true master."

The women who had once seduced him whispered to him all at once.

"True master..."

Before Tenchi could even grasp the meaning of those words, Tsukuyomi raised her voice.

"My daughters, kneel! This is the Prince of Darkness, my master and my sacrifice. Praise him, exalt him. Love is born in the darkness and returns to the darkness."

Praise him, exalt him!

The rows of navy hoods swayed as they began to move, following behind Tenchi and Tsukuyomi.

The name of the ruler of darkness! The name of the one consumed by darkness!

Tsukuyomi took Tenchi's arm and led him to a pedestal that stood like a pitch-black tombstone.

"Do you love me?"

Tsukuyomi sat Tenchi down atop the symbol of the Halo engraved into the pedestal, then leaned down to peer into his eyes.

"Do you want me, Prince? I have offered you love and drawn out the power that was sealed within you. What will you give me in return? Oh, penniless Prince, how shall you pay your debt?"

Tsukuyomi's crimson eyes glowed eerily, reflecting Tenchi's upturned face. Tenchi felt his own two tiny reflections—mirrors in which no emotion should be readable—staring back at him with absolute clarity.

I won't forgive you...!

That's what those eyes said. *I'll kill anyone who takes Mom away.*

Tenchi trembled. *This isn't me! These aren't my eyes—they look like a monster's. You... the 'you' inside of me... who are you?*

Give Mom back!

A voice filled with a hatred so deep it felt like spitting blood answered back.

I'll destroy this whole world!

It was a voice filled with a despair that could burn the world to ashes.

Those two voices were so intense, so heavy—emotions that had been too young to be put into words back then had now broken through the seals placed upon them, overflowing and racing through Tenchi's body like fire. When his lost shadow filled every corner of his veins as the power of darkness, Tenchi suddenly realized:

This is me...!!

For a moment, his pulsing blood froze at the terrifying truth. He could not have survived if he had lived with these feelings. If the feelings his five-year-old self

held in the depths of his soul had been unleashed, they would have burned him up and would not have stopped until his father, his grandfather, and the entire world were reduced to ash. That was how immense the power was.

"Why...!?"

Tenchi grabbed Tsukuyomi's arm, forcing the words through his clenched lips. A memory that should have been there was completely missing.

"Who was it!? Who sealed away my heart and my power!?"

"I do not know, Prince. Do you wish to become the true master of your own soul?"

Tsukuyomi sat beside Tenchi and slowly pried his digging fingers from her arm.

"Then leap. See it for yourself with your own eyes—using the power I have drawn out from within you."

Tsukuyomi stroked Tenchi's cheek with an expression of overwhelming affection.

"But first, I shall take my price. You must forget everything but me. A love that holds you back and troubles you is something you should have no need for now. I shall consume it for you. Little child, you shall become my son. And when you finally return here, that will be the day we exchange our eternal vows."

Tsukuyomi pulled Tenchi's face close and kissed him. At that moment, a pain shot through him as if something more precious than anything else—something deep in his soul whose name he could no longer even remember—had been torn away.

"Tenchi-sama!"

A voice, sounding as though it were being wrung from the back of a throat, struck Tenchi's ears.

"What are you doing!? Why are you in a place like this!? Let me through!"

Ayeka's voice!?

Tenchi turned around. He saw Ayeka—who was supposed to be on the bridge of Ryo-Ohki—struggling desperately to push through a human wall of navy-robed figures.

"Tenchi-sama, help me!" Ayeka reached out her hand as if clinging to him.

"Why does it have to be Tenchi-sama?"

"You have everything already, so why do you want even more?"

Moonshade, Viola, and Tsukuyomi's nameless daughters surrounded Ayeka, their hands reaching out to toy with her.

"You have so much, don't you? Look, your hair ornament."

Their hands snatched away her tiara and tossed it aside.

"The Princess's clothes!"

Her sash was untied, and her outer robe was torn away.

"Stop... stop it, please!!"

The daughters laughed and chattered as they tormented Ayeka, who was now left in only her undergarments.

"Is being naked so frightening? Love cannot begin until one is naked, you know?"

"Tenchi!!"

Along with the shout, a red and black battle suit cut into the circle of women like a shockwave.

"Ryoko!?"

Seiran followed close behind her like a shadow.

"So you're the Queen!? Give Tenchi back!"

Ryoko drew her aura blade. "Out of my way!"

The circle of daughters broke apart amidst screams.

"Pirate..."

"Murderer..."

"Monster...!"

A wall of whispering voices rose up to block Ryoko's path.

"How many lives have you taken with that sword?"

"What do you want from Tenchi-sama?"

"A monster in the shape of a woman..."

"You believe only in power; how can you love another?"

"Shut up!"

The aura blade mowed down the daughters, and a section of the circle collapsed. The red and black battle suit dashed through.

"Tenchi, you're being tricked! That thing isn't a woman—it's a monster that sips on human souls! Get away from her!"

Ryoko leveled her aura blade at the Queen of the Night. "Snatching away someone else's man! What did you do to Tenchi!? What kind of things did you say to him!?"

"Foolish creature."

Tsukuyomi stood up. "Pitiful beast who knows nothing of love, I have merely opened the Prince's eyes. A man decides his own path. Is that not right, Prince?"

Tsukuyomi touched the aura blade, and in an instant, the sword itself vanished.

"First Princess of the Juraian Royal Family, Ayeka. And Ryoko. You both wished for a miracle of love, and so you came here. I shall grant the wish that lies in the deepest part of your hearts. Look well, Prince."

Riiiiiing...

The sound of the rings resonating made the air in the great hall tremble, and the daughters backed away. Glowing halos descended from the air and enveloped Ayeka and Ryoko. The rings of light tightened, and the binding was complete.

For an instant, both of their faces twisted in agony. Something was trying to manifest. Something was trying to crawl out from within Ayeka and Ryoko.

"Tenchi-sama, please look at me."

A hazy shadow emerged from Ayeka, taking on her exact form and separating from her body to call out to Tenchi.

"Look at me. I am the peerless Princess of the Juraian Royal Family, the greatest in the universe. Now, kneel at my feet. If you do as I wish, I shall offer you a love beyond compare. Tenchi-sama, what are you doing? Why do you

hesitate? Come here, Tenchi-sama. Become my husband and inherit the Juraian Royal Throne!"

"Tenchi!"

The shadow that emerged from Ryoko called out. "You're the one person who won't betray me, right? No matter how selfish I am, you still love me, right? You want me, don't you? Come on, Tenchi. Throw away your home and come with me. I only need you. I'll kill anyone who gets in the way. I'm going to consume you. You're my prey!"

"That's not it!!"

The bound and immobile Ayeka screamed. "I... the Juraian Royal Family..." Her words trailed off.

Ayeka was crying. She had been trying to have everything. The immense power of the Juraian Royal Family, a kind husband who would do as she wished, an heir of the correct lineage, and a brilliant future... all for the price of just a little love.

"Tenchi... I..."

That was all Ryoko could manage to say. In front of the enemy she had intended to cut down, her body trembled for the first time. The strength rapidly drained from the fists she had clenched to try and shatter the binding halo.

It's no use... Ryoko's lips trembled. *Tenchi will never come back to me. I'm going back to being the demon of the shrine. Back to that lonely prison without light, where no one will ever fulfill me...*

"The truth is a truly terrifying thing."

Tsukuyomi's quiet voice struck the ears of everyone present.

"Prince, and you, the man who follows Ryoko like a shadow. People wish for miracles of love, but they turn their eyes away from the darkness. A wish lurking in the depths of the heart can sometimes be like a brilliant star, and other times like the sediment that sinks into the dark. These two have also been turning their eyes away."

"I knew that." Seiran answered with difficulty.

His schemes to turn the game in his favor shrank before the Queen’s eyes and finally withered away. This was a kingdom of shadow and darkness. Sweet words of love and threats would only dry up, fall to the ground, and become bitter fruit. There were no winners here. Seiran felt a sense of despair. *I can't even be Ryoko’s shadow. My existence is nothing more than a phantom of the past...*

Suddenly, unexpected words burst from his mouth.

"What does any of that matter!? I have no need for miracles of love. Ryoko is everything to me. If Ryoko wants my soul, I’ll give it to her. If she says she doesn't need me, then that’s fine. Prince of Light, if Ryoko says she loves you, then that’s fine too. Even if Ryoko doesn't love me, I can only continue to care for her—because that is the only truth I know."

Tsukuyomi stared intently at Seiran’s face and smiled with amusement. "Seiran, was it?—That is an admirable attitude. The day will come when that sincerity of yours is tested."

"I don't care about any of that."

Tenchi, his brow still clouded, slowly stepped down from the pedestal. "I’m not the Prince of Light. I’m nobody. I don't care what anyone thinks."

As Tenchi walked, the shadows of Ayeka and Ryoko rushed toward him as if clinging to him.

"Isn't it fine for everyone to have their own shadows? They just said what was truly on their minds, right? There’s no need to be so ashamed."

A sword that seemed to be made of gathered darkness appeared in Tenchi’s hand.

"I’m jealous. You’ve all been able to live honestly with yourselves..." Tenchi’s expression took on a pale tint.

The next moment, the blade of darkness slashed through the shadows of Ayeka and Ryoko. A piercing cry of agony rang out, and the shadows vanished.

"I didn't even have a shadow. Someone sealed it away. That's why I didn't feel anything when I became a good boy and did what people told me, or when I fought, or when I grew carrots. I thought that was fine. When Tsunami called me the Prince of Light, I didn't even know what she meant. I defeated Kagato

without knowing anything. That’s right... Mom told me to be a good boy, so I just did as I was told. For a long, long time... that’s right, for eleven years!"

Tenchi waved his hand to make the blade of darkness vanish. Looking down at his clothes, he carelessly threw off the Prince of Darkness coat with its halo symbol. Standing in just a plain white T-shirt and his familiar black jeans, Tenchi turned back to Tsukuyomi, his face suddenly clouding over.

"Goodbye, Queen of the Night. If I had stayed the Prince of Darkness, I might have been able to hold you once more."

Tenchi-sama... with that woman...

Tenchi picked up the coat and turned to Ayeka, whose face looked as though her heart had been crushed. He draped it over her back.

"Ayeka-san. Don't worry about it. I don't think anything of it." It was the same calm voice as the usual Tenchi.

That kindness pierced Ayeka’s heart like a needle.

"Seiran. Ryoko was in a shrine on Earth, near my house. Don't forget to go and get her."

Tenchi suddenly looked away. "Goodbye, everyone. I was a pathetic man, but it was fun."

Darkness began to gather around Tenchi.

"Tenchi!! Where are you..." Ryoko felt something was wrong.

It wasn't Tenchi. She couldn't feel the warm, soft light that always enveloped him. The darkness surrounded Tenchi even more thickly and began to swirl around his body like a living thing. Tenchi seemed to be surrendering himself to the dark energy, his back still turned.

"Tenchi!"

The binding halo shattered with a flash. *No, I have to stop Tenchi...* At that moment, a feeling of sadness reached Ryoko’s soul. *He's crying... Tenchi's soul is crying, not knowing what to do, holding onto a pain as deep as spitting blood...*

"Don't go!!"

As Ryoko tried to leap forward, Seiran’s arms held her back. "You’ll be blown away! Look at that vortex of energy! Ryoko, don't go!!"

"Let go of me!" Aura energy flared from Ryoko’s entire body.

"Ugh..." Seiran’s face twisted in pain.

Tenchi glanced back at Ryoko. Deep shadows fell across his cheeks, making his face look like a monster's.

"Don't follow me! I... I finally know how to use my power. I'm going to Mom. To that time when Mom was alive. I won't let anyone get in my way. I don't care if history changes. I’m going to see Mom again...!"

In that instant, the darkness enveloped Tenchi, and a blackness as if even the starlight had vanished covered the great hall. By the time the cold starlight returned to the palace, Tenchi was gone.

"Tenchi!!" Ryoko threw off Seiran’s hand and ran to the spot where Tenchi had been standing.

"Tenchi...!?"

A faint sobbing could be heard. "Tenchi-sama..."

Ayeka stood there, still draped in the Prince of Darkness coat. "I’m sorry, Tenchi-sama... I... said such terrible things..."

She looked miserable, not at all like a princess. Ayeka sank to her knees and covered her face.

"Come here."

One of the Queen’s daughters approached Ayeka and dropped the tiara onto her lap. "Join our circle. Love is born in the darkness and passes away."

The princess's clothing fell softly at Ayeka’s feet. "Love is born in every moment and vanishes into the void. Eternity is but a succession of moments."

Moonshade stroked Ayeka’s hair and then walked away.

"But in this universe, you might encounter the one light that illuminates us. The daughters of darkness keep searching. Flying through time..."

"People say we have eternal life, but..."

"We shall let you out of your prison."

"The cage of the flesh..."

The hands of the daughters of darkness touched Ayeka one by one as they walked away. Ayeka looked up blankly, staring at the beautiful daughters with unfocused eyes.

"Can I go to where Tenchi-sama is?"

"Yes."

"You must search for him too." The daughters laughed and chattered.

"If you don't go now, you may never see him again."

"Become like us."

"Eternal life..." Ayeka whispered. "I want to go. To Tenchi-sama..."

"Come." Viola took Ayeka’s hand and helped her up. "Entrust your soul to Mother."

Ayeka took a step forward, her hand being led.

"Wait just a minute, you damn Ayeka!"

A strong force pulled her back by the shoulder. "What do you think you're doing, dying? If you listen to what they say, you'll become a ghost. Do you want to see Tenchi so badly that you'd become like that!?"

"Ryoko-san?" Ayeka turned around.

"I’ve got it. I see what these things really are..." Ryoko’s eyes narrowed with a golden light as she stared straight back at the Queen of the Night.

"It’s just like Ryo-Ohki guessed. You’re monsters that live by consuming information. I don't know if you can even call it 'living,' but as long as there’s information, you can be reconstructed as many times as you want. That’s what you call eternal life, isn't it? You were planning to seduce Tenchi and eat him. Just like you manipulated me and Ayeka. You idiot! If Tenchi gets eaten by you, he won't be human anymore!"

Ryoko drew her aura blade once more. "I might be a monster, but I don't care about living forever. As long as Tenchi is in this universe, that’s enough—I just want to be by his side. Queen of the Night, give back the soul you sipped from Tenchi!"

Ryoko’s feet kicked off the floor, and the aura blade swung down in a trail of light, slicing through Tsukuyomi’s body. It looked as though half of her body had been blown away. But the next moment, the Queen appeared without a single wound.

"Ryoko. It is useless to try and defeat me. If you were created by gathering the finest information, you should understand that much. Unlike that princess there, your form is that of a semi-informational entity that is constantly being reconstructed. If so, you should be able to understand my heart as well. Yes..."

Tsukuyomi walked up to Ryoko, bringing her face—shining white like the moon—close. "I want Tenchi too. Just like you."

"We’re nothing alike!" Ryoko shouted back instinctively.

"I and these daughters may be different, alien life forms from you. But we exist just as you do. I want the Prince’s child. Ryoko, have you never thought the same?"

Ryoko gasped and backed away. "That's..."

"The Prince may walk a new time and erase the old. If that happens, it is you, who are bound to time, who shall vanish. Now, go home. I shall watch over things quietly from between the cracks of time."

"Vanish? We...?"

Tsukuyomi smiled radiantly, raised her hand, and sent Ryoko and the others back to normal space.

The snow fell silently. It piled up, deep and quiet.

"Mom?"

Five-year-old Tenchi suddenly felt an unusual presence in his sleep and opened his eyes. "Mom?" he called out again.

Achika woke up and smiled. "Can't sleep? Come here."

Tenchi looked around the room curiously. It was his mother’s familiar room. His mother’s futon and his own small futon laid out beside it. When he had woken up in the middle of the night before, it had been pitch black and he couldn't see well, but today everything felt strangely dim and bright.

"Mom, it's already light out."

Achika looked at the clock by her pillow. "It's still the middle of the night. What is it, Tenchi?"

"Outside..." Tenchi sat up and pointed to a dark shadow cast upon the shoji screen. "Someone's there."

Sixteen-year-old Tenchi stood in front of his mother's room. It was the old room, before it had been rebuilt. The toy cars he'd often been scolded for leaving out because they scratched the floor were still lying there, just as he'd left them when he played.

Mom is on the other side of this shoji screen... Tenchi's hand trembled as he reached for the frame. *I've really come. Eleven years ago... on that snowy night when Mom was sleeping beside me.*

He felt a presence moving inside the room. Tenchi's heart leaped. He hurriedly backed away. The shoji screen slid open with a click.

"Father?"

Seeing a teenage boy he didn't recognize, Achika caught her breath. "...Who are you!?"

Her white face, illuminated by the snowy light, was young and beautiful, just as it was in Tenchi's memories.

"Mom!!"

In that moment, Tenchi forgot all the anger and sadness that had brought him here. "It's me. It's Tenchi. I wanted to see you..."

Before Achika could run, she was held tight by the tall boy. "Mom... Mom..."

The boy's tears fell onto Achika's neck, wetting the collar of her kimono.

"Ten... chi?" Achika's fingers stroked the boy's short hair. "That can't be... Who are you?"

"Let go of my mom!"

A high-pitched voice rang out. Little Tenchi—his younger self—stood there with a serious face, his fists clenched. "I'm Tenchi! Let her go!"

A small fist struck out with all its might. Tenchi gasped, let go of Achika, and backed away.

"I’m sorry. I startled you... of course I did. But it’s true. I am Tenchi. I wanted to see you so much that I traveled through time to get here."

"Time...!?"

Achika looked back at the boy’s face. *He looks like... no, that’s not it. These eyes, this face... they’re definitely my...*

"Mom!!"

Seeing Achika stagger, Tenchi instinctively caught her. "Why did you come? How old are you now?"

"I’m sixteen." Tenchi sat Achika down on the futon and knelt beside her. "I came to tell you something important. Mom, let's leave here right now. I can travel through time and space. Let's go back further. No, let's go to Grandpa's home. If we go to Jurai, I’m sure you can live longer. You can't stay here! Please, understand!"

"Longer?" Tenchi caught his breath. "What do you mean, live longer?"

Crap! I accidentally... Tenchi’s face twisted in pain. "...I didn't mean to say that. Please don't ask anything and just do as I say. We have to go right now!"

"Wait, Tenchi!" Achika took Tenchi’s hand and held it firmly. "You really did come from the future. You know something, don't you? It's all right. You came here to tell me that, didn't you?"

Tenchi felt his younger self trembling with fear. He had no memory of learning the truth in this way. *Why did I forget? Why didn't this memory remain?*

"Mom is..."

It felt as though a hot lump was stuck in his throat, and Tenchi instinctively swallowed. He couldn't say it. He absolutely couldn't say it. *That Mom will die in three days...*

"I’m going to die, aren't I?"

Tenchi’s body froze. "How..." That was all he could manage to say.

"I knew. It’s a wonder I’ve been able to live this long. You wanted to help me, didn't you?" Achika’s hand touched Tenchi’s cheek as if touching a treasure. "You've grown so much... you've become such a fine man... Tenchi..."

Tears welled up in Achika’s pale eyes and spilled over, running down her cheeks. "It's all right, Tenchi. This is the fate I chose. Thank you for coming to show me your face."

"Mom..." Tenchi was unable to say anything more. *She knew...? Then, this fate can't be changed!?*

"That’s a lie!!"

A high-pitched scream suddenly cut in. "It’s a lie that Mom’s going to die! You’re a liar! I’m Tenchi! Go away! Don't touch my mom!!"

"Tenchi!" Achika’s hand pulled her younger self close. "It's all right. This big brother is a very important friend of Mom’s. He’s not a liar. Don't say such things. You're a good boy, aren't you?"

"I’m not a good boy!" Little Tenchi struggled. "Hey, liar! If you don't go away, I’ll beat you up! I’m strong!"

Little Tenchi’s body was enveloped in a shimmering aura, and the mark of power appeared on his forehead.

"Tenchi!?"

Energy flared, and Achika’s hands were pushed back. A sword of light appeared in his five-year-old hands. It wasn't the Master Key, but it looked exactly like the sword from a hero show Tenchi had been obsessed with back then.

"The power of Jurai...!?" Achika’s eyes widened. The energy flaring from the body of the small prince in his pajamas was far stronger than her own power.

"You mustn't!" Achika threw herself forward. *This child's power is too great. He mustn't be allowed to use it without understanding it. This power will sever and distort the flow of time. At this rate, he will erase his future self.*

"Yah!!" Little Tenchi swung the sword of light and charged straight forward.

"Stop!"

In that instant, Achika threw herself between the two Tenchis. The sword of light bit into Achika’s shoulder and stopped.

"Mom!?" It was sixteen-year-old Tenchi who shouted.

"Ah..." The sword vanished from little Tenchi’s hand, and the light faded. "Mom! Mom!!"

"...I’m okay. Your mother is a daughter of the Juraian Royal Family. Your mother is strong too." Achika’s thin body covered little Tenchi as she hugged him tight. "Go, quickly! I will seal this child. Go back to the future where you belong!"

Achika held little Tenchi firmly and whispered the words of Jurai. "Masaki Achika Jurai. In the name of Tsunami and my true name, I seal the power of Prince Tenchi. Heaven to sea, sea to land, land to heaven, with my life I seal this power and these memories..."

The expression on his younger self’s face gradually became vacant. Achika’s body was enveloped in light energy, but Tenchi could see her life energy rapidly seeping out from the wound on her shoulder.

I see... that's how it was...

I was the one who... Mom...

The surrounding scenery blurred. Tenchi let out a cry that sounded like spitting blood and vanished from this time and space.

Chapter Sixteen:
"Mother...!!"

"Mother...!!"

Fragments of a heart frozen in the rift of time came crumbling down.

"I... to Mother..."

A silent scream gouged and tore through his insides like a sharp blade.

I killed my mother...!

This was the truth. The scene Tenchi had just witnessed—the events of that snowy night—flashed back in his mind over and over.

Why did he have no shadow? Why did another version of himself, a power, dwell within him? This was the price for seeing what he might have never known if he hadn't questioned it, if he hadn't wanted to know.

If he hadn't met the Queen of the Night, he might have lived forever as a "good boy," honoring his mother's words. In the sun-drenched warmth of Okayama, surrounded by girls, he might have spent his days in dream-like happiness without a single worry.

Happiness? Yes, a fairy-tale life. *And the Prince lived happily ever after, surrounded by many girls...* Until he learned the truth at sixteen.

Why didn't I die!?

He felt as though his own soul was being sucked into the darkness along with the light of life that had seeped from his mother Achika's body.

It would have been better if he had died. If his own hands had killed the future self who came to bring the ominous prophecy... then Mother might have lived a little longer. Perhaps the future would have changed. Mother might have lived, and the three of them could have had a truly mundane, ordinary life.

Even if he had vanished at sixteen. He would have been fine with that. As long as Mother lived.

Of course, he would never have met Ryoko or Ayeka. He would never have gone into space or used the Master Key. If Mother were alive...

Floating in a colorless rift of time, belonging to no era and no place, Tenchi sobbed.

"I can't go anywhere anymore. Having killed my mother, I can't return to the future. I can't go back to the past."

If his heart had chosen this space-time, then he would stay here forever. In this closed dimension, like a crevice connected to no time or place. Tenchi curled into a ball, hugging his shoulders. Slowly, his heart grew cold.

Phantoms of the women—appearing and fading, flowing toward him with the movements of his heart—clung to him. Tenchi brushed them away irritably.

Go away!

Tenchi closed his eyes. The colorless space around him dyed itself in darkness. Within that dark, the faces he had just brushed away appeared, shifting one after another.

Why, why, why? the faces cried.

Why are you running away, Tenchi? It was Ryoko's voice.

What of your promise to me—the promise to bring back the Water of Life? Ayeka's voice, full of resentment.

Tenchi-niichan, you're coming back, right?

Tenchi-san isn't the kind of person to break a promise.

What happened to your training, Tenchi?

Tenchi, your father believes in you.

The voices blended, overlapped, and became a jumbled mess he could no longer discern.

I know.

Tenchi covered his ears with both hands.

I know, so please, don't say any more. I'm not the man you all—and my father—think I am... I'm a child who should never have been born.

Though he was being besieged, his heart felt numb. There was a massive hollow inside him, and words were spilling out of it one by one. Leaving only a single phrase behind:

Matricide!!

His own voice pierced him like a curse. The final truth. The true words that would never change until the end of the world. Tenchi gave a violent shudder and opened his eyes.

Space...!

He could see twinkling stars, and between them, three anchored ships. One was an unfamiliar cruiser, one was a Galaxy Police shuttle, and the other... No mistake, that ramming prow—it was Ryo-Ohki!?

Then he had come back. Out of the rift of time, out of that alien space. Into his original time. He had been pushed back. Into the flow of time where he was meant to be.

Ryo-Ohki's bridge drew closer. Inside the bridge, covered by its transparent hemisphere, he saw figures who should have been in the Queen of the Night's palace. Ryoko, Ayeka, Seiran. They were all back...?

In the shuttle's cockpit were Mihoshi and Kiyone. And one unfamiliar blonde woman.

No...!

Tenchi instinctively raised his arms as if to shield himself. He didn't want to go back. He couldn't go back carrying these feelings. What on earth was he supposed to say?

Father, I'm the one who killed Mother. Grandpa, my power was a cursed energy sealed by Mother's blood.

There was no way he could say such a thing!!

It was then. Ryoko looked up, as if moved by something.

Ryoko, don't look!!

In the vacuum where sound shouldn't travel, he let out a cry. At that instant, it felt as though the flow of time, which should never stop, had truly frozen.

Across the transparent, hard dome, Tenchi caught sight of Ryoko, and Ryoko caught sight of Tenchi.

"Tenchi!?"

At that voice, Ayeka and Seiran turned and gasped.

"...Tenchi-sama!?"

In the shuttle's cockpit, Yukinojo was picking up strange energy interference waves.

"Warning! Space-time phase is distorted warning! It is dangerous if we do not evacuate, warning!"

Kiyone, who had been taking Blondie's deposition in her usual First Class Detective manner, was grabbed by the arm by Mihoshi. She saw something unbelievable on the screen. Tenchi was floating in open space without a shield or a space suit.

"No way... how is that..."

Kiyone suddenly stood up, switched on the comms, and screamed.

"Tenchi-san, can you hear me? Get inside quickly! You'll die! Tenchi-san...!"

"Yukinojo, the rescue net!" Mihoshi's voice cut over Kiyone.

"Roger!"

Kiyone slumped into her seat, stunned. *What... what did I just do?*

As she stared vacantly at the rescue net being launched toward Tenchi, Kiyone realized she had just acted in a way completely unbecoming of an elite detective.

"Washu-san! Tenchi-san is—quickly!"

As Kiyone shouted into the internal comms, she saw Tenchi evade the rescue net and move backward.

"Tenchi-niichan!?"

Sasami, having heard the internal comms, came rushing in. Behind her came Washu, her face unusually pale.

"...Has the time come?"

Washu acknowledged Tenchi floating in space, then backed away quietly and leaned against the corridor wall.

"Washu-san?" George, noticing the anomaly, came out of the kitchen and called to her.

"...George." Washu beckoned him, stood straight, and whispered rapidly. "We haven't even exchanged a contract yet. So I'm asking this of you as a friend—will you listen?"

"Anything, Washu-san." George leaned down with a simple, pleasant smile.

"This time, there's nothing I can do. No advice, no hints, no explanations—none at all. If I show my face, I'll inevitably fall into that role. So, I'm not here. If anyone asks, say you don't know. I can't afford to be interrogated here. I have something I must do. Can I count on you?"

"I understand," George replied instantly, nodding. "Please go. I will answer your trust with all the abilities I possess."

George held out his hand. Washu smiled slightly and shook the silver hand.

"Thank you." Washu returned to a serious expression and vanished into the back of her private room.

Tenchi watched, trembling, as the rescue net was fired from the shuttle and fruitlessly retracted.

Don't look at me, leave me alone.

The turmoil in his heart was so violent that he had almost lost the capacity to think about what force was keeping him in this vacuum, or what that force was trying to achieve.

I didn't come back, I didn't...

"Tenchi!!"

A voice sounded right beside him. In the vacuum, where sound could not travel, it echoed directly into Tenchi's mind.

"You've come back... you've finally come back, Tenchi..."

Before he could even realize that Ryoko's figure had vanished from the bridge, she appeared beside him in her battle suit, having teleported.

"No..." Tenchi's voice didn't carry.

Her supple body hugged Tenchi tight, and her light-blue hair swayed, tickling his face.

"Let's go home, Tenchi. Let's go back to Earth. It doesn't matter if you aren't mine, as long as you're there, that's enough."

Through his thin T-shirt, Ryoko's nails dug into his shoulders.

"Ryoko!?"

His shoulders hurt. Even though his heart should have died when he learned the truth, his body still felt pain. *Am I still alive?* Exposing himself to a vacuum that would have killed a normal human long ago, his power created a field in this space, rejecting death.

I'm not human anymore. I've become something else.

A monster that traveled through time, killed his mother, and now held an unidentified force raging inside him—a monster that didn't even know what to do with that power.

Let go!!

As he tried to shake off Ryoko's clinging arms, he caught sight of Seiran's face, standing on the bridge. Seiran didn't move an inch; he stared at Ryoko's back with pressed lips. In his ultramarine eyes was the color of sadness. A blue flame, too single-minded to be called love.

I love you... I love you, Ryoko. No matter what you do, no matter what you think, I love you. Even if the universe met its end right now, I would find you and come for you. Until you are mine, until we are one in soul, forever...

Seiran's eyes said it all. Those words, which never reached his lips nor were shouted in his heart, enveloped Ryoko's existence like a light illuminating the darkness.

Love? You say you love her!?

Tenchi's fingers, wrapped around Ryoko's back, twitched. A violent hatred, like an impulse, was born within Tenchi for the first time and swelled up.

How much he had loved his mother, how much he had sought her. Having lost her forever, he was still seeking her. He loved her, he had loved her. He loved

her so much that if love could have changed fate, he would have changed it long ago—even now!!

"Let go, Ryoko!!"

Tenchi's voice reached Ryoko, the trembling Ayeka on the bridge, and Kiyone and the others in the shuttle's cockpit with perfect clarity.

"What were you waiting for? What do you expect from me, chasing me all this way? To keep a promise? To return to Earth? To go home and quietly till the carrot patch?"

Tenchi shook off Ryoko's arms and floated to a position looking down at the three ships.

"I've had enough! I don't need a future. I don't need promises or love that can't even protect a single person. Vanish! Everyone, just vanish!!"

Darkness swirled around Tenchi's body, spreading like black flames.

"Emergency evacuation! Energy levels are dropping, Warning! Prepare Scramble Drive, evacuating on a 10-count, warning!"

In the shuttle's cockpit, Yukinojo shouted, and emergency lamps flashed on the console.

"Why... what on earth happened!?" The light of the stars vanished from the screen, blocked by the darkness gathering around Tenchi.

"Kiyone, look! Tenchi-san is crying..." Mihoshi pointed at Tenchi on the screen, her face pale.

Tenchi's face, floating in the center of the darkness, looked like an evil spirit. There was no sign of tears.

"No! He's not crying. Tenchi-san has become someone else. That's not Tenchi-san. He would never do this..."

"You might not be able to run." Blondie, who had been sitting with her legs crossed looking up at the screen, stood up. "Mama is coming soon. Stay here and witness the end. Or do you want to go to another world? If you don't hurry, you'll be swallowed by that boy's black hole."

Blondie's green eyes twinkled with amusement as she turned around.

"The end!?" Kiyone forced the words out, gasping. "The end of what?"

"The end of this world. Oh, how exciting! This is a first!"

At that moment, the countdown ended.

"Evacuation impossible! Evacuation impossible..."

The console lights went out, and the illumination dropped. Yukinojo's voice cut off, and all instruments went silent. The darkness was coming.

"Kiyone!" Mihoshi crawled through the dark, trembling, desperately feeling for something. "The ring? That miracle ring..."

"This?" In the doorway of the cockpit, Sasami's hand, forgotten by everyone as she trembled, held out the ring.

"Sasami-chan! That's it. Make a wish! Stop Tenchi-san!"

Gripping the ring, which emitted an eerie light even in the darkness, Sasami stared fearfully at the monster-like Tenchi on the screen.

"Tenchi-niichan... go back. Go back to the usual Tenchi-niichan!!"

For an instant, expression returned to Tenchi on the screen. He opened his mouth as if to say something and looked back into Sasami's eyes.

"Goodbye, Sasami-chan." Everyone there heard Tenchi's voice, sounding as if it came from a world far, far away.

"Tenchi-niichan...!?"

The ring fell from Sasami's hand. The warmth that had flashed like light vanished, and Tenchi's expression became cold and stern once more. Sasami backed away with wide eyes, hitting the cockpit wall and slumping down.

"Where's Mug? Where is he? George-san, find Mug..."

Something soft and fluffy was pushed into her arms.

"I'm right here. Princess Sasami, please lend me the ring."

George picked up the ring from the floor and handed it to Blondie. "Please save this child and the detectives, Blondie-san. That is the only miracle I wish for."

Blondie looked back at George with a strange face. "You... you're weird. Having a soul despite being a robot. Well, fine."

Blondie looked around the cockpit, which was almost swallowed by darkness, and smiled at the shivering, embracing Kiyone and Mihoshi.

"Do you believe in miracles? Elite detectives. In less than a minute, this ship will be swallowed by the darkness and leave no trace. This boy is the miracle itself! Every time and space connected to him will vanish. The future and the past will disappear. Because that is what he wished for. Likely, hollows will open up everywhere. An unstable world full of moth-holes will undergo self-collapse. Every existence will be torn apart, scattered, and mixed together. Like a soup of darkness..."

As Blondie looked up rapturously, her blonde halo emitted a radial glow.

"Our food, the source of life! Oh, it's thrilling. I wonder what flavor a soup with all information melted into it will have?"

Despite the energy being at zero, the screen continued to show Tenchi, flickering like a flame of darkness. Kiyone felt her body grow cold. *Of course. The air conditioning and life support weren't working.*

"Mihoshi..." Kiyone gripped Mihoshi's hand with trembling fingers. "Are we going to die? Is that it?"

"No." Mihoshi shook her head slightly. "We're going home. I believe in Tenchi-san. Even without a ring, a miracle will surely overturn this fate. We just don't know the real Tenchi-san."

At that instant, the darkness swallowed the shuttle.

"Myaa-on!"

Ryo-Ohki's hull teleported in a flash, snatching Ryoko from the edge of the darkness and reappearing a short distance away.

"Ryoko!!" Seiran caught Ryoko as she appeared on the bridge. "We have to run. The Prince is no longer human. Something has changed that boy. If we linger, we'll be swallowed by the darkness just like that shuttle. We have to Scramble Warp now!"

"Seiran..."

Looking up into the eyes of the man who had been her partner long ago—eyes that sparkled like blue jewels—the image of Neptune's Tears, which had

vanished along with a wedding dress in the white mist of sub-space, crossed her mind.

I'm sorry, Seiran. You and I were destined to pass each other by...

"You really are an idiot, aren't you?"

A hot golden flame ignited in Ryoko's eyes. "Did you think I'd tuck my tail and run? Tenchi is Tenchi. I've never seen him like this, but if I don't stop him, who will? Don't worry, I'm not built that flimsy."

"Ryoko!?" A violent conflict appeared on Seiran's face for a moment. "...Is your heart his? Can it not be mine for even a moment? Is that how it is?"

Ryoko's eyes clouded. "Sorry, Seiran. Take care of Ryo-Ohki for me. Take Ayeka and get as far away from here as you can. Ryo-Ohki! From now on, he's your master."

"Myaaaaa-on..." A long, trailing cry like a shout echoed through the bridge.

"See ya."

For an instant, Ryoko's lips brushed Seiran's cheek, leaving a whisper in his ear. Turning away, Ryoko stared into the center of the spreading darkness and stepped forward. Tenchi looked like a small cross floating in the dark.

"Wait!" Ayeka's hand pulled her arm back. "I am coming too. Ryoko-san, I will cast a barrier. Let us go together."

There was firm resolve on Ayeka's face. The usual sharp edge had vanished, replaced by a soft beauty that made Ryoko gasp.

"I was a fool. Miracles are not for one's own sake. I finally understand that now. Look..."

Ayeka pointed to the place where the shuttle had been swallowed. Right around where the cockpit had been, a barrier of light floated, enveloping three small figures. The figure creating that barrier was even smaller than the three.

"Washu...!"

Ryoko suddenly felt like laughing. To Washu, it probably wasn't a "miracle," but at least Sasami and the others were safe.

"Let's go, Ayeka." Ryoko grabbed Ayeka's hand and vanished from the bridge.

Seiran stood stunned, staring at the space where the two women had disappeared.

"Ryoko..."

She was gone... this was the third time, and this would be the final farewell...

I'm sorry, Seiran.

She had certainly said that. A woman who had never bowed her head to anyone had shown kind eyes and spoken kind words for the first time. She wouldn't be coming back. Seiran's eyes followed Ryoko's receding figure. Like feelings that were never rewarded, the thing he had kept seeking was drawing further and further away...

Suddenly, overcome by a violent impulse to chase after her in Ryo-Ohki, Seiran sank to his knees and closed his eyes tight.

No! I must not follow. I decided that once already. Ryoko, I will be your shadow...

Seiran looked up. He felt as though he had suddenly found what he needed to do.

"The Talisman of Miracles..."

Seiran held out his hands as if in prayer, picturing the face of the woman he loved.

"I will protect Ryoko. As a shadow, as a shield, I will protect all of her. Queen of the Night, I have no power, but I offer you this life. Take the price."

Riiiiiiing...

With a trembling sound, the talisman that should have been in the shuttle appeared and settled in Seiran's hands. Seiran wrapped both hands around the talisman, closed his eyes, and bowed his head. His figure slowly faded as if melting into the darkness. Then, the talisman fell to the floor of the empty bridge, rolling with a clear sound.

"Tenchi!"

The moment they stepped into the vortex of darkness, a terrifying energy hit them. Anger, regret, despair... the emotions Tenchi had experienced were raging as an energy that threatened to tear their bodies apart.

"What... is this!?"

Like two seabirds tossed in a storm, Ryoko and Ayeka were nearly torn apart, but they overlapped again and drew closer to Tenchi bit by bit. Ayeka's barrier surrounded them like small pillars of light.

"Ayeka..." Ryoko grit her teeth. "Don't you get it? This is Tenchi's heart. This is the energy being spat out from his heart. ...It's painful. I don't know what happened, but it's sad, Ayeka. Tenchi is lying."

"Lying!?"

"Tenchi isn't trying to erase us. He's actually trying to erase himself. Isn't that right, Tenchi!!"

Tenchi, who had been staring into the far distance with his arms spread like a cross in the center of the dark, slowly lowered his hands. The raging storm of energy began to swirl slowly around him.

"...Why did you come? I'm not Tenchi anymore. The weak, good-natured Tenchi you knew is dead. I had finally managed to forget everything, and now you both come to interfere?"

"No!" Ayeka stepped forward. "Why did it come to this? Tenchi-sama, what happened? I will do anything in my power. Please, tell me why. Ayeka loves you. I came here prepared to die if you told me to. But I do not wish to die without knowing the reason. Tenchi-sama, Ayeka has come to know the truth."

"The truth?" Tenchi's expression took on a look of anger. "Then let me ask you: what is the power of the Juraian Royal Famiky? What does it exist for? What does the power in these hands of mine exist for!?"

"That is..." Ayeka faltered. *Why? You fought Kagato for Ryoko and me*. If there had been even a hint of falsehood in those feelings, he shouldn't have been able to use the Master Key... Ayeka answered. "It is to protect the one you love. It exists to protect oneself and those one loves. That is how the contract of power is formed."

"Is that true?" Tenchi opened his hands and looked down. Light gathered between his palms, forming a blade. But the moment he looked up, it turned

into a blade of darkness. "This is the Master Key. This blade can certainly protect someone important. But it can also kill. Like this!"

Tenchi swung the sword down. The barrier shattered with a flash.

"Kyaaaah!" Tenchi's anger and sadness rushed in, striking Ayeka's entire body.

"Why did Mother give me this power? I didn't want this. If Jurai's blood is controlling my fate, then it would have been better if I was never born!"

"How can you..." She couldn't breathe. The darkness was too thick to cast a barrier. "Why would you say such a thing? Tenchi-sama, when you traveled through time, what did you see?"

"Shall I tell you, Ayeka-san?" Tenchi made the blade vanish, cupped Ayeka's cheeks with both hands, and brought his face close. "I killed my mother. When I was five, I held a Master Key in these hands and killed her..."

In the eyes she was forced to look into, a single scene was projected. A young boy charging with a scream, the Master Key biting into the shoulder of Tenchi's young mother (whom he was seeing for the first time), and sixteen-year-old Tenchi standing there, pale.

"No way..." Ayeka staggered and was caught by Ryoko.

"Now do you understand? This is the truth. It's burned in and won't leave. What can you possibly do? What can you do!?"

The blade of darkness appeared in Tenchi's hand again.

"If there is only one thing I can do, it is to erase this world. This cursed fate. And I will vanish too." Tenchi swung the sword in a horizontal sweep.

"Stop it, Tenchi!!" At the last second, Ryoko's arm pulled Ayeka down, and the blade cut through empty air.

"Why are you running away!? If you erase her and me, can you run away from what you saw? Can you forget if you erase everyone? Your mother didn't wish for that, did she? Since when did you become such a cowardly man? I'm not about to die alongside a guy like that!"

An aura blade appeared in Ryoko's hand. "If you want to die that badly, I'll kill you myself. Tenchi, fight me. I'll see if a soft guy like you can actually beat me."

A blinding aura flared from Ryoko's entire body, pushing back the darkness.

"Here I come!!" A strike so fast it left an afterimage attacked from straight ahead.

Tenchi instinctively twisted his body, evading the attack by a hair's breadth.

"Liar! You don't actually want to die, do you?" Ryoko's eyes narrowed with a golden light. The aura blade flashed, slicing through the darkness.

Ryoko was serious. *If I don't fight for real, Ryoko will erase me...!*

There was no more time for thinking or talking. Tenchi parried the attack with his dark blade and cut back. His body, ingrained with Master Key training, moved on its own—reading his opponent's movements and measuring the distance.

In Tenchi's heart now, there was only anger. The power he would have unleashed if Ryoko hadn't been there, the pain revived by Ayeka's words, the future where he would continue to live tormented by regret...

"Don't get in my way!!" A scream was wrenched from Tenchi's throat. "You don't understand my feelings! Vanish! Vanish from my sight forever!"

The blade of darkness shattered the aura blade and slashed through Ryoko's arm. As the return stroke was about to slice Ryoko's neck, the shadow of a man stood before Ryoko like a shield.

Chapter Seventeen:
"You are... Seiran!?"

"You are... Seiran!?"

The man who stood before Ryoko was indeed Seiran. Tenchi couldn't fathom how a flesh-and-blood man—unlike Ryoko—had made it this far, but there was no mistaking that it was Seiran catching the dark blade with his bare hands.

"Stop this, Prince!"

The blade shattered within Seiran's grip.

"Ryoko loves you. Can't you see how much pain she endured to reach you? Don't turn away! Look closely at the world you were trying to erase."

Seiran’s eyes held a clear light, like stars washed by a dark sea. They were the eyes of a man who had cast everything aside. Tenchi faltered.

"Don't... interfere...!" His voice wavered at the end.

As if sensing that hesitation, Seiran smiled faintly and stepped aside to shield Ryoko, who was still pale and trembling.

"Tenchi..." Ryoko didn't even seem to notice Seiran’s presence. "Why... why are you doing this? Do you really want everyone to disappear? You saved me inside the Soja. We all came back together. Your father and grandpa are waiting. If you and the world vanish, where am I supposed to go?"

Suddenly, Ryoko ran to Tenchi as if colliding with him, grabbing his shoulders.

"I like the way you usually are... Pathetic, a softie, but someone who never lies... that's the 'you' I want...!"

Ryoko buried her face in Tenchi’s chest and sobbed like a child.

"Tenchi... please stop. Even if you die, it won't bring your mother back, will it? Everyone came here because they were worried. Ayeka, Mihoshi, Kiyone... because, you know, you get depressed so easily when you're alone. It’s better when it's noisy, right? I'm sorry... I couldn't do anything for you..."

Something shifted in Tenchi's heart. Much like Gerda's hot tears melted Kai's frozen heart in the Snow Queen's palace, Ryoko's tears filled the void in Tenchi, soaking into his dry, cracked spirit.[2]

Watching the two of them embrace like a pair of young saplings, Ayeka suddenly saw a vision of a blessing rain falling upon them. What she thought was rain was actually tears. Above Tenchi, a young woman in Juraian attire spread her arms protectively. Her cast-down face looked like Tsunami, yet also like his mother, Achika.

"...Achika-san?"

The phantom vanished before Ayeka could focus her eyes, leaving only Tenchi with a bewildered face and Ryoko sobbing like a little sister.

Can't you see her, Tenchi-sama? Ayeka wanted to scream. *Your mother is right there. She has been protecting you all along. If you just open your eyes, you'll see her right beside you.*

This world is full of love!

The Juraian blood pulsing in her ears acted like a sensor, detecting invisible particles of love. They were scattered to the corners of the universe, waiting for the moment to be connected. Each particle had a positive and negative switch. One held the power of light, the other the power of darkness; they bonded and fused to create a flow.

Within that flow, the switch of one particle flipped. That change immediately reached Ayeka's blood, resonating and flipping switches one after another. Ayeka felt the flow of power shift. Looking at the two embracing, she felt no jealousy—only a strange sense of peace.

We all feel the same way, Ayeka thought. *We want to ensure that the one who stepped into the darkness alone and tasted its fruit never gets pulled back into that world again.*

The bitter fruit of truth you tasted burned your throat and deafened your ears, staining everything in shadow—but within it is the seed of love. Surely, Tenchi-sama will notice it...

Ayeka felt these wordless thoughts like a physical warmth, sensing the hearts of Sasami, Mihoshi, and Kiyone enveloping Tenchi like a prayer.

---

[2] This is a Hans Christian Anderson Fairy Tail that isn't popular in the west called the Snow Queen.

Come back! To our world!

Ayeka unconsciously clasped her hands and prayed. *We can do nothing, we have no power, but seeing Tenchi-sama suffer is more painful than being cut to pieces. If any power remains in the miracle talisman we used so wastefully, please, I beg you—help Tenchi-sama!*

Riiiiiiing...

Ayeka thought she heard a faint resonance, like an auditory hallucination.

Inside Washu's barrier, Kiyone suddenly tilted her head. "Do you hear that...? Even though the talisman is gone."

Mihoshi turned to Kiyone and smiled like someone waking from a dream. "I was praying. You were too, right? Our wishes must have combined into one."

Mihoshi took Sasami's hand and pulled her close. "Sasami-chan's feelings got through. She loves Tenchi-niichan more than anyone. I'm sure of it..."

Sasami leaned against Mihoshi without a word, gazing dazzlingly at her sister's determined back. *My sister really does love Tenchi-niichan... She's always fighting with Ryoko-neichan, but right now, they're both thinking the exact same thing.*

Come back... Tenchi-niichan, come back...

"I heard it too." Sasami reached out to Kiyone.

"I see... we're all thinking the same thing, aren't we?" Kiyone gripped her hand firmly. "Mihoshi... I'm going to believe in miracles. I'm such an idiot, aren't I?"

"No, you're not," Sasami answered for Mihoshi, smiling brightly.

Slowly, the aura of darkness vanished from around Tenchi. He looked down at Ryoko's light-blue hair as if noticing it for the first time. A pale blue, like a winter sky... The same blue hair that had wavered like a ghost through the falling snow while he cried before his mother's grave... A slender, supple figure seen in the innocent landscapes of his childhood. The faint whisper he'd heard when he opened the shrine's lock, and that first chaotic meeting.

"Ryoko?"

At his voice, Ryoko looked up. "Tenchi... you'll stay by my side, right? You won't disappear? What's with that face, Tenchi... tell me 'yes'."

Tenchi let go of her, looking dazed. His anger was gone, replaced by a deep, permeating regret. *What have I done?* Seeing the blood dripping from Ryoko's arm, he felt sick with himself. *I tried to kill Ryoko...*

He had never felt such a way before. Had the thing he was trying to unleash truly desired such an end?

"Tenchi-sama!" Ayeka's voice called out. "Wake up. Your mother is surely watching. If you use your power for hatred or anger, it will be consumed by blood and darkness. Your mother wouldn't have wanted that..."

Tenchi turned. Ayeka, Sasami (protected by Washu's barrier), Kiyone, and Mihoshi were all staring at him as if in prayer.

"Lovely Prince, hurry up and erase the world," Blondie's blonde hair emerged from the darkness. Behind her, the radiant figure of Tsukuyomi appeared.

"Choose, Prince," Tsukuyomi smiled like a sweet nightmare. "Whether to walk with the time of this world, or walk a new time with me—you must decide. I will offer you love and erase all your memories. All suffering will vanish, for you shall be reborn within me."

Tenchi realized he was standing alone at the center of the world. "I..."

He looked at each of their faces. The women who had been involved in his life—a bouquet of different loves, each with a different hue, but all sincere—were waiting for him to answer.

I can't accept it. Tenchi looked down in pain. *I don't have the right. I haven't done a single thing for them. In fact, I was going to erase them... erase this world...*

For a moment, the thought of surrendering to Tsukuyomi and forgetting everything crossed his mind. It was a feeling similar to falling asleep—forgetting the bad and embarrassing things, closing your eyes and hoping for a new morning... knowing what happened can't be undone, but vowing to start over tomorrow...

Tomorrow!? Tenchi suddenly realized. *If I forget this world, tomorrow will never come. My memories of Mother, the time I've lived—it will all vanish. Mother's wishes, her words, the power I inherited... everything.*

And in the end, I would vanish from this universe without having accomplished a single thing.

Tenchi!!

He thought he heard his mother’s voice and snapped his head up.

You must not run away. You are the one who inherits my soul. This power is the one and only gift I could leave you. Please... accept my feelings. Do not let them return to the darkness...

"Mother!"

Light returned to Tenchi’s eyes, and the mark of power appeared on his forehead. The flow changed. The void that had opened like a black hole to swallow him shattered instantly, returning to the world as particles of light.

"...I can't." Tenchi looked back at Tsukuyomi. "I can't go. No... I won't. I have to go home. This power is a memento of my mother... it is her soul."

Tsukuyomi stared at Tenchi—and the mark shining on his brow—for so long it felt as if time itself had stagnated. Her crimson eyes searched him, shaking him as if testing him, before she finally stepped back.

"Young Prince, it seems you have grown."

As Tsukuyomi smiled, a pain like a scratch from a claw shot through Tenchi’s chest. "Then I shall depart. Until the day our paths cross again. Remember this, Prince: your power and your existence summoned me. The day will come when we meet again—when you have become an adult and that power has become a burden. Farewell."

Tsukuyomi’s figure wavered as if laughing and slowly vanished into the dark.

"Ah well, just when it was getting interesting. Oh well. Let’s meet again sometime!" Blondie wrinkled her nose and laughed, then vanished like sparkling dust into the darkness.

Tenchi stared at the spot where they had vanished, looking stunned. "...I have to go home," he muttered, turning to Ryoko with a bewildered look. "What should I do? I have no idea where we are..."

"Tenchi!!" Ryoko appeared beside him and hugged him so hard he nearly choked. "Ryo-Ohki is right here! I’ll take you home right now. Come on, let's go."

"...Yeah." Tenchi smiled. "Let’s go home, Ryoko. To Earth..."

Tenchi wrapped his arms around Ryoko’s back and buried his face in her light-blue hair. It smelled like the sun—warm, sweet, like dry wind and light.

At the edge of his vision, a transparent shadow wavered. "Seiran?"

Seiran stood beside them, half-transparent, as if he had truly become Ryoko’s shadow.

"Don't worry about it, Prince," Seiran laughed. "I wished for a miracle to protect Ryoko. My wish was granted. That is enough for me."

Seiran’s form faded, and the stars behind him began to shine through. "I love you, Ryoko. My soul will always be by your side. As long as you live..."

For a split second, the starlight outlined Seiran’s silhouette, then it slowly faded away. By the time Ryoko focused her eyes, he was gone, vanished into the dark.

"Seiran!? You don't mean..."

She realized it too late. Without a word, Ryoko took Tenchi’s hand and they teleported into the approaching Ryo-Ohki.

"Oh dear..." Ayeka stood beside Washu, staring at the spot where they had vanished, then turned around as if she couldn't take it anymore. "What about us? How are we supposed to get home?"

A familiar smirk finally returned to Washu’s face. "Now *that* is the kind of question I welcome."

The moment Washu snapped her fingers, the bridge of their familiar shuttle appeared. "If you guys lost this, you'd get more than just fired, right?"

Mihoshi and Kiyone looked at each other on the floor of the bridge. "Was that a dream?" "I thought it had vanished." "Washu-san, what's going on?"

Washu chuckled at the two of them. "Well, you can think of it as a dream if you like. Honestly, that’s the least troublesome way to handle it."

"It was... not a dream." Ayeka was still dazed, but she turned to Washu with newfound determination. "Washu-san, please transfer me to Ryo-Ohki’s bridge

immediately. Tenchi-sama has forgotten his promise. Whether this was a dream or not, I cannot leave Tenchi-sama and Ryoko alone together!"

As she spoke, Ayeka blushed and looked down shyly. "...I don't mean it like *that*. I'm just... worried about Tenchi-sama..." She wiped her eyes and smiled like a blooming rose. "Everything is back to normal now, isn't it? Tenchi-sama really has come back?"

"That's right, Ayeka-dono." Washu didn't say more, simply looking back with her unfathomable green eyes. Then, her expression softened into a rare show of gentleness. "Well done, everyone. If Tsunami were here, I'm sure she'd say the same."

"Washu-chan, Sasami is going too!" Sasami, clutching the pure white Mug, clung to her sister's arm. "I'm tired of staying behind. I want to show Tenchi-niichan this little guy."

"Yes, yes, easy enough." Washu waved her hand, and Ayeka, Sasami, and Mug vanished.

"Washu-san!?" Mihoshi and Kiyone screamed. "Where's Ayeka-san?" "What promise?"

"One question at a time, please." Washu frowned at them. "I transferred them. And the promise—everyone seems to have forgotten—is to go to Jurai and get the Water of Life. Now, the magic is over. I'll leave the rest to you."

Washu waved her hand and left the bridge. "Wait! I still have so many things to ask—"

At that moment, all power was restored, and Ayeka's face appeared on the screen. "We are going to Jurai. Please set the data."

"This time, everyone is going together!" Sasami's cheerful smile cut in.

"I'm sorry... this is because of me..." A bashful Tenchi peeked out from behind them.

"Barging onto someone else's ship without asking... and here I wanted to go back to Earth," Ryoko's face pushed everyone aside before the transmission cut.

"So that's how it is." Kiyone sat down and poked Mihoshi's shoulder. "We have to go. There's no telling what those people will do if left unsupervised."

"It'll be fine," Mihoshi turned around. "This has become an official invitation from the Juraian Royal Family, hasn't it? The world-famous Juraian fleet will handle our security. Let's enjoy our vacation without a care. Besides... we don't have to escort that person anymore."

"You mean Seiran?"

"Yeah." Mihoshi nodded. "I have to return this to Ryoko-san." She pulled a red bandana from her pocket and placed it beside the console.

"That’s Seiran’s..."

"It’s his remains." Mihoshi smiled at the bandana and then gave instructions to Yukinojo. "Yukinojo, auto-drive to Planet Jurai, please."

"Roger!" came the reply, as if nothing had happened.

Stopping by the kitchen, Washu found a seemingly depressed George on a stool.

"Washu-san, I was of no use. Please drop me off at the next port." George sighed and tried to leave the kitchen.

"Why? I came here to make a contract." Washu blocked the doorway and spoke rapidly. "Contracts are a pain, so I’ll just do this verbally. I want to hire you as an assistant/secretary/conversational partner. As for the pay, it's three meals and a nap—oh, and I promise top-tier maintenance plus a little extra. What do you say?"

"You're hiring me?" George smiled and held out his large silver hand. "Then, I shall also take on the role of cook."

"That would be a huge help." Washu shook George’s hand. "It’s a bit sad for Sasami-chan to be the 'little mother' forever. Okay, contract's a deal."

Washu smiled as if another problem had been solved. "Seeing your face puts me at ease. Babysitting those kids is pretty exhausting. Come on in. I want to hear your story." She led the tall robot out of the kitchen.

"Now then..." Just as Washu and George settled onto some futons in the briefing room with junk food and drinks from the convenience station, Kiyone’s voice came over the internal comms.

"Washu-san, I forgot one important thing. Ayeka-san’s guardians are still deactivated. What should I do? Sorry, but could you come over here?"

"Ah..." Washu made a face. She had completely forgotten. George was the only one lucky enough to see that expression.

"Good grief, and here I thought everything was finished." Washu stood up from the pile of futons, her face returning to that of the genius scientist, and looked down at George. "Even I’m not omnipotent, you know."

She said the uncharacteristic words while looking longingly at the futons.

"My apologies, I had forgotten as well," George replied, looking around the messy room as he stood up. "I shall tidy up here before you return."

"For a robot, you're quite something," Washu laughed. "Do you have a forgetfulness circuit? Or is your capacity just lacking?"

"It is likely a lack of capacity."

"Modest, aren't we?" Washu turned at the door. "Who made you?"

"Did I not tell you?" George began efficiently stacking futons and sorting the scattered belongings. "When the Omnipotent God made Adam and Eve, I was created from a single Integrated Circut to maintain and manage the Garden."

"So you're the world’s first butler, then." Washu laughed heartily and left the room.

Kiyone and Mihoshi were checking various sections for the long flight, but they jumped when Washu walked in grinning.

"Sorry, Washu-san..." "We could have let you sleep until Jurai."

Washu pushed past Kiyone and placed her hands on Azaka and Kamidake, who were standing stiff like actual logs. "If I wake them up, they’ll be noisy, I bet."

The moment the jewels at the top lit up, the two guardians began harmonizing simultaneously.

"Where is Ayeka-sama!?" "How long were we deactivated!?" "Where is Tenchi-dono!?" "Where is Sasami-dono!?"

"See?" Washu turned to Kiyone and shrugged. "They're noisy, so get them in touch with Ryo-Ohki’s bridge."

"Sorry." Kiyone switched on the comms.

"And so, Ryoko-san. Tenchi-sama is exhausted, and if you cling to him like that, he won't be able to rest. I came here because I knew this would happen!"

Tenchi was sitting in the center seat of the bridge, looking up at Ayeka with a dazed expression.

"Shut up!" Ryoko, clinging to Tenchi's arm, bared her teeth. "What's the big deal? I'm happiest when I'm stuck to Tenchi like this. If you're so jealous, why don't you try it yourself instead of acting so high and mighty?"

"That's exactly why I'm saying it's unnecessary!" Ayeka marched up to the two and settled on the side opposite Ryoko. "Pleeaaase, Tenchi-sama."

She clung to Tenchi's arm with a sweet, pampered voice so unlike her that Ryoko let go in shock.

"I felt like my life was shortened this time. And I realized... how happy I am to be like this. I will never leave Tenchi-sama's side again. I'll throw away the name of the Juraian Royal House. I have decided to live as a single woman."

"Ayeka-san?" That terrifying line gradually soaked into Tenchi's fuzzy brain. "You can't! That's no good!" Tenchi sat up. "You can't throw your life away for me. You have to think carefully about such a serious thing..."

"If I think about it, my life will be over," Ayeka countered calmly. "I like Earth. Once Ryu-Oh grows up, we can visit Jurai, and I'll open a small shop in Okayama and we can live together forever and ever. That way, I won't have to be away from Tenchi-sama, right?"

"Ayeka, you..." Ryoko was speechless.

"A shop... doing what?" Tenchi asked a stupid question, still failing to grasp the situation.

"Anything will do." Ayeka gazed up at Tenchi's face rapturously. "A restaurant or a cafe would be lovely. Let's make a cute shop where everyone can gather. Lace curtains swaying in the windows, and I'll wear a pure white apron..."

"Wait a minute, Ayeka!" Ryoko, having finally recovered, snapped at her. "Who's going to cook? Eh? What can you make when you've barely ever held a kitchen knife?"

"Sasami is here, isn't she? And even I can make tea."

"What is it, Sister?" Sasami, who had been playing with Mug on the floor, turned around. "Are you hungry?"

"We were talking about our dream shop. Come here, you too." Ayeka beckoned gracefully. "Don't you think it would be fun to have a shop with Tenchi-sama? What should the name be? Ryoko-san, if you can behave and help out, I might hire you too."

"Wait a minute, Ayeka-san..." Tenchi realized that the world had returned to its original state in the blink of an eye. This world was ruled by two great goddesses, Ayeka and Ryoko, and he was loved by them to his very core.

"I'll decide the name of the shop." Tenchi stood up and looked at the two goddesses and the little kitchen fairy. "'Tenchi Muyo' (No Need for Tenchi / This Side Up)! There's no more perfect name than that. Okay, I'll leave the funding and interior design to you!"

Tenchi smiled, backed away, and bolted from the bridge.

"Tenchi-sama!" "Tenchi!!"

At that moment, Azaka and Kamidake filled the screen.

"Ayeka-sama! Are you safe?" "We are coming there immediately!"

"Oh, Azaka! Kamidake!" Ayeka let out a surprised cry. "I completely forgot about you. Who fixed you? No, you don't need to come. Please contact Father on Jurai. Tell him to deploy the Juraian fleet to the fixed point and prepare a welcome. And also..."

Ryoko, who was about to chase Tenchi, found something shining on the floor and picked it up. "The talisman..."

She had heard the story of Seiran's disappearance via direct comms from Ryo-Ohki, but she'd kept it to herself without telling anyone. "You really are a bottomless idiot, aren't you?"

Ryoko stared intently at the golden, glowing miracle talisman, then gently fitted it over the jewel on her left wrist. "This is fine, right? I don't need miracles anymore, so just stay by my side. You know, Seiran..."

Ryoko looked up at the sparkling sea of stars where Seiran had vanished. "I'm probably a woman who can never get married. I'm just not built that way."

Sasami, who had been talking to the guardians with Ayeka, turned around. "Hey, Ryoko-neichan, what about that pirate man...?"

Ryoko stood still like a single blade, gazing up at space. Seeing the golden talisman on her left arm, Sasami somehow missed her chance to speak. "...I see. He’s gone, isn't he? Blondie-san and Winnie too... we won't see them again."

Sasami picked up Mug and nuzzled his fluffy fur. "Hey, Mug. When I grow up, I wonder if I can be as beautiful as her."

Mug squinted happily and licked Sasami’s cheek with his little pink tongue.

Tenchi, having fled the bridge and returned to his room, flopped onto his bed and let out a deep sigh from the bottom of his heart. "It all started with that emergency call..."

Myaa-on! Myaa-on!

Thinking of Ryo-Ohki’s voice, Tenchi looked up at the ceiling in the same silence as when he’d first left. Tsukuyomi’s face, so beautiful it made his chest ache even now; Seiran’s eyes, clear like Neptune’s Tears; the blonde woman who claimed to be Tsukuyomi’s daughter... various memories crossed his mind.

"I’m home..." Tenchi whispered. "Mother. I’m definitely going to train more. Until the day I can use this power in a way that honors your heart. You’ll be watching, right? Just like you called out to me back then..."

Tenchi closed his eyes. When he did, the center of his forehead grew warm, just as it had when Tsunami touched him.

"Thank you, Mother."

Tenchi smiled with his eyes closed. Enveloped in a sense of relief like his mother’s warmth, he fell into a peaceful sleep he hadn't known for a long time.

Meanwhile, at the distant Masaki household...

In front of the TV that was left on as long as anyone was home, Nobuyuki and Katsuhito were quietly eating dinner.

"Father, I wonder how Tenchi is doing."

"He probably isn't doing his training." Katsuhito sipped his tea, looking no different than usual. "The young ladies are all with him. There’s nothing to worry about."

"I hope so." Nobuyuki sighed.

"Have faith in my grandson." Katsuhito’s straight back didn't waver. "You’re more of a worrywart than Achika was."

"But Father, it’s the first time he’s gone out." Nobuyuki grumbled to his rice. He grumbled the same thing every night. And every night, Katsuhito gave the same answer.

"Why hasn't he even called once?"

"They say no news is good news." Katsuhito finished his tea and stood up. "The only thing you're actually good at is making tea."

The phone at the Masaki house, connected to the ansible, rang three days later in the evening.

It was half a month after that when Tenchi and his party, having arrived at Jurai, left again with the Water of Life.

As for the chaos Tenchi and the others caused upon returning to their beloved home... that is a story for another time.

Afterword

Tenchi-kun’s long, long journey of hardship has finally ended, and thus we have our sixth volume. The author, having accompanied Tenchi, Ryoko, and Ayeka on this journey of madness, is now tasting a bit of a bitter realization: (*Why on earth did I write a story like this?*)

It wasn't as if he *had* to go on such a painful trip. He could have just swung the invincible Lighthawk Sword and focused on slaying monsters. He could have gone searching for the Seven Secret Treasures scattered across the galaxy. Fun adventures, dreams, and romance were all lying in wait for him—and yet, in some fit of delirium, he went on a journey to "find himself"...

But, this is ultimately what Tenchi-kun wanted. What is he, really? Is he a Prince? The world’s greatest carrot farmer? The garnish on a plate of sashimi? Is he a "man" in his own right, or just the sprig of parsley served on the side? And why is it that he can never quite take that final step forward?

In the end, Tenchi-kun found an answer that fit him just right and came home. Compared to the fact that the universe was nearly undone, it’s a tiny little answer, but an answer nonetheless. Ryoko and the others came trailing back after him like goldfish poop. So, for now, they all lived happily ever after.

I say that because, without the goldfish, the "goldfish poop" would just be... well, poop. And that would be a disaster! ...I had intended to wrap this up with a serious afterword for once, but look at the pathetic metaphor I've ended up with.

You’ve had enough of the "serious" stuff? Yes, yes, quite right. I suspect Tenchi-kun feels the same way. "Rice and miso soup are the best after all!"—something like that.

Actually, I find myself wondering now what he even ate while he was wandering out there. But since the freelance robot George-san has come to the Masaki house, their dietary life should be just fine from here on. Truthfully, I wanted to show off his genius knife skills or tell the story of his days before he worked

part-time at Space Burger, but I suppose that will have to wait for another time.

Speaking of which, I should offer a few parting words for the sub-characters I couldn't mention in the first volume's afterword. Blondie and Winnie—those two scattered innocent malice like sparkling flowers throughout this love-filled "Tenchi" universe. Right about now, I imagine them in the gaps between time, having an endless chat and grooming their nails while looking for the next "exciting thing."

And then there is the Queen of the Night, Tsukuyomi—the only person in this universe who came within a hair's breadth of turning a scene with Tenchi-kun into [CENSORED]. They have human forms, yet they are beings without souls. Did my attempt to write about such existences work out? Those who dwell in darkness, those without souls, George—who "has" a soul despite being a robot—and the pirate with ultramarine eyes who sought true love. I hope their existence enriches your world, even just a little.

Truth be told, I actually love ghost stories and the world beyond human understanding (being a total fantasy otaku), but on the other hand, I'm a fan of Professor Ohtsuki [a famous Japanese paranormal skeptic]. My daughter, caught in the middle of this confusion, has grown into a girl who loves ghost stories. I understand her plan to thoroughly conquer one side of the argument first, but reading *Suspiria* under the covers is just asking for nightmares.

Anyway... I feel like I've started talking about unrelated things, but the next "Tenchi" installment serialized in *Dragon Magazine* will be bite-sized. I hope to create many delicious stories of different flavors and shapes, like baking cookies. Every now and then, something super spicy or a "sea cucumber" flavor might be nice too... sounds exciting, doesn't it?

And so, it seems Tenchi-kun’s tribulations are far from over. Reality aside, within the world of the story, I am currently scouting for ingredients night after night, aiming for a "richly set dinner table." Please look at it, touch it, and try a taste.

On Valentine's Day, with love.

Naoko Hasegawa